

The Goodness of God and Old Testament Cruelty

Reading: Deuteronomy 7:1-3

Introduction:

When you read the scriptures, you can't help but notice the kindness, goodness and mercy of God (**Psalms 31:7a; 100:5; 117:2; 119:68; Isaiah 6:3; Ephesians 2:4; Titus 3:4-7**). In fact, we are reliant on His grace and mercy for our salvation (**Ephesians 2:8**).

But at the same time, when you look at some of the historical accounts recorded in the Old Testament, you can see that some people were to receive very severe treatment at the command of God. For example, **Deuteronomy 20:16-17** states;

“But the cities of these peoples which the Lord your God gives you as an inheritance, you shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them.....just as the Lord your God has commanded you.”

(The context of this passage is during the time near the end of the wilderness wanderings, when the Hebrews are about to enter the promised land of Canaan.)

There are other accounts where God gave similar commands;

“...you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them” (Deuteronomy 7:2)
- the context of this passage is the same as Deuteronomy above.

“...go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and do not spare them. But kill both man and woman, infant and nursing child, ox and sheep, camel and donkey” (1 Samuel 15 3).
- the context of this passage is that God wanted Saul to punish Amalek for what it did to the Hebrews during the wilderness wanderings (**Exodus 17:8-14**).

From a human stand-point, this may raise questions in our own minds;

- *How can a God who is so rich in mercy command such “cruel” destruction upon some people?”*
- *“Is God being inconsistent?”*
- *“Is God showing partiality?”*

While we live here on earth, we may never fully understand why God chooses to do some of the things that He does. But in this lesson, I would like us to consider some points from scripture that relate to this issue.

LESSON

1) God has the right to deal with mankind as He chooses

God is the creator (**Genesis 1:1**). We are His creation (**Genesis 1:26**). He is the Lord God almighty (**Genesis 17:1; Revelation 11:17**). We are in subjection to Him (**Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10-11**) – not the other way round. Even the winds and the waves are obey His voice (**Matthew 8:23-27**).

We read in **Isaiah 55:8-9** that;

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“...My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” says the Lord “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”.

What do these verses tell us? Being humans, our thinking, our knowledge and our understanding are very limited compared to God’s. **1 Corinthians 1:25a** says;

“The foolishness of God is wiser than men.....”

While mankind may think that it is very smart and clever, it comes nowhere near the intellect of God. Therefore, we need to be careful that we don’t start deciding what is right or what is wrong for God to do or not do. God knows better than us, and in **Psalm 19:9b** we read;

“...The judgements of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”

Whatever decisions and actions the Lord takes, we can be confident that they are the right ones. In **Romans 9:14**, Paul asks a rhetorical question, and then answers it;

“.....Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!”

Earlier in the **Roman** chapter, Paul talked about choices God had made;

- He chose Isaac and rejected Ishmael – vs.7b-9 (**Genesis 17:18-19**)
- He chose Jacob and rejected Esau – vs.10-13

To some of those people living there at the time, these choices may not have seemed fair. But when we look at Biblical history, we can see that God made the right choice;

- Consider the character of Isaac, in his submission to his father when being offered up as a sacrifice – **Genesis 22:1-14**
- Consider the type of person Esau was;
 - willing to sell his birth-right for a bowl of food – **Gen. 25:29-34**
 - made bad choices when choosing his wives – **Gen. 26:34-35**
 - in **Hebrews 12:16**, it is implied that he was a fornicator and profane person.

When it comes to God passing judgement on people, we read in **Romans 9:15** that there are some on whom the Lord has mercy, and others for whom He doesn’t¹. Paul points out in verse **16** and **18a** that it is not up to man to decide who God shows mercy to, but God Himself.

Point: There are some things that we will see “eye to eye” with God about, e.g. the need for love and forgiveness. But there will be other times when things that seem logical to us may not be in accordance with the Will of God. It is during these times that we need to put aside our own ideas, and accept the wisdom of God.

¹ In the New Testament, we see that unrepentant sinners, and those who do not obey God, cannot expect God’s mercy at judgment (**Hebrews 10:26-31**; **2 Thessalonians 1:8**). But those who fear Him and work righteousness are acceptable to Him (**Acts 10:34-35**).

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2) God gave people time to repent

We don't have a specific record of what communication God had had with these nations occupying Canaan². But we do know that they were aware of God and who He is. When the two spies went to "check out" Jericho prior to the Hebrews entering the promised land, Rahab told them that they knew what God had done 40 years earlier when the Hebrews crossed the Red Sea. They knew what had happened to the kings on the other side of the Jordan. And they knew that God is the God of Heaven and Earth. (**Joshua 2:8-11**). But apart from Rahab's helping the spies, there is no indication of any sort of repentance from the rest of the people.

When God was telling Abraham about the future of his descendants, He said that they would be in a foreign land under affliction for 400 years (**Genesis 15:12-13**) One of the reasons for the delay in the children of Israel entering Canaan was that the "...*iniquity of the Amorites*³ is not yet complete" (**Genesis 15:16**). These people were sinning, but "now" wasn't the time to punish them. Their sinfulness did not warrant their total destruction – yet.

Note: One of the lessons that we learn from **2 Peter 3:9** is that God is patient, giving people time to repent. But His patience will not last forever. There comes a time when God says, "*Enough is enough*".
- consider also **Revelation 2:20-22**)

Point: It seems that by the time the Hebrews arrived at Canaan, the time was right for God to inflict punishment on these peoples. They had been given plenty of time to repent of their evil ways, but there is no indication in God's Word that they did. And so God was now going to use Israel as the instrument of His judgment upon them⁴.

3) God's righteousness / justice are meaningless if wickedness is not punished

God is a just God (**Revelation 15:3b**⁵). Righteousness and Justice are the foundation of His throne (**Psalms 89:14; 97:2**). His goodness and righteousness are seen in the fact that He gave these people centuries to repent – implied from **Genesis 15:16**. His justice is seen in that, because they had failed to repent after having plenty of time to do so, He punished them for their evil ways (**Deuteronomy 9:4**).

² The people of Nineveh were Gentiles. We don't know what communication God had with them prior to Jonah's arrival. But they were accountable to God (**Jonah 1:2**), and needed to repent of their sins (**Jonah 3:1-10**).

³ The Amorites, as a specific nation, lived on the east side of the lower Jordan/upper Dead Sea area. However, in this context, it refers to the peoples of Palestine in general, e.g. **Joshua 10:5**. Ref. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Volume 1, A-C, "Amorites", pages 142-143, paragraph 5. "Amorites in the OT".

⁴ God sometimes uses one nation to inflict His punishment on another nation. For example;
- **Jeremiah 1:14-16; 2 Chronicles 36:15-21** God sent the Chaldeans and Babylonians to punish Judah.
- **2 Kings 17:5-18** Assyria was used to destroy the unfaithful northern kingdom of Israel.

⁵ "...*Just and true are your ways*..." NKJV

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Consider also the following question: How can God demand righteousness if He lets unrepentant sin go unpunished?

Sin has its consequences. The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah lacked any sort of righteousness, except for Lot (**Genesis 19:1-9**). They were engaged in unrepentant wicked works, and as a result, they were totally destroyed because of it (**Genesis 19:24-25**).

In the opening verses of the letter **Jude**, the writer is exhorting his readers to contend earnestly for the faith (vs. **3**), for some men had come along who were perverting the truth (vs **4**). He then goes on to say how the Hebrews were destroyed after leaving Egypt because of their unbelief (vs **5**). He then mentions the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and says that their fate is an example of what happens to those who reject righteousness (vs **7**).

The point is this. As part of exhorting us to be faithful to God and His Word, it is also pointed out what happens to those who reject God. The fate of cities like Sodom and Gomorrah are mentioned as reminders to show what happens to people when they choose to disobey God.

Point: If there is no punishment for the wicked, then where is justice? Even from a worldly perspective, most of mankind feels that justice has not been served when a convicted criminal gets off “scot-free”.

One of the reasons for punishment is to provide some incentive to do what is right. If there is no punishment for unrepentant sin, what would be the point of (or need for) the gospel? What would be the point of denying the sinful passions of the flesh for the cause of Christ (**Matthew 16:24**) ?

When God destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel because of their unfaithfulness and rebellion (**2 Kings 17:5-18**), there was an expectation that the southern kingdom of Judah should learn the lesson, and turn back to God (**Jeremiah 3:6-8**). Passages such as **1 Corinthians 10:1-11** show that we, too, are to learn from the punishment of others.

4) The destruction of the wicked preserves the morality of the masses

When the children of Israel were about to enter the promised land, God revealed His concern for their spiritual welfare. He did not want them to follow the idolatry and evil practices of these other nations. If they did, then they too would be destroyed (**Deuteronomy 8:19-20**). He gave them strict instructions in **Deuteronomy 7:1-11** that they should not inter-marry with these nations, nor let their idols remain, in case they became a means of causing them to turn away from the living God.

Even in the New Testament, we see the same principle. We are not called on to go out and destroy people. But we are told to consider carefully those with whom we keep company. In **1 Corinthians 15:33** we read; “.....*Evil company corrupts good habits.*” We can be influenced by those around us, and Satan can use our acquaintances to “chip away” at our resolve to deny worldliness (**1 Peter 4:1-4**). Even those in the church who continue to engage in unrepentant sin are to be removed so that they don’t have a bad influence on the rest – **1 Corinthians 5:1-7, 9, 11**.

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Point: God treats sin seriously. It is so serious that it required His Son to come to earth to pay the penalty for our sins (**Romans 5:8**). There are serious consequences for the unrepentant sinner (**Romans 6:23a**). God doesn't want anyone to be lost (**2 Peter 3:9**). And so there have been times when God has taken what we may consider to be "drastic steps" in order to spiritually protect His children. The destruction of the nations of Canaan would reduce the exposure of God's people to evil practices, and help to preserve them spiritually.

5) The destruction of the innocent are a consequence of man's free choice

Some may ask the question; "*But what about those who didn't engage in the evil practices, yet were caught up and killed in the destruction ?*"

Allowing man to be "free moral agents" brings with it consequences and responsibilities. One of the consequences is that people can choose to sin, and when someone sins, quite often there are others who suffer because of it. For example, a drunken, speeding, driver who crashes into other people causing their death or injury. A burglar who attacks the victims in their home.

Even in the scriptures, we see accounts where other people suffered because of someone else's sins.

- **Numbers 14:33** – An entire generation had to spend 40 years in the wilderness wanderings because of the sins of their fathers⁶.
- **Joshua 7:5, 20** – Thirty six men were struck down at Ai (during the conquest of Canaan) because of Achan's⁷ sin.
- **Acts 7:54-60; 12:1-2** – Stephen and James were killed because of their faith.

It can be tragic to see the "innocent" suffer because of the sins of others, and we need to do what we can to help those in need – **Matthew 25:34-36**. But we also need to remember that these (physical) consequences do not determine whether a person is eternally saved or not. Eventually, we will all die (unless Christ returns first **1 Thessalonians 4:14-17**), and we will then face God in Judgement (**Hebrews 9:27**). And that Judgement will be based on what we have done (or not done) in this life, not on how we died (**2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-13**). That Judgement will be based on whether we have been obedient to God or not (**2 Thessalonians 1:8**), rather than whether we were innocent victims⁸ who suffered because of the sins of others.

⁶ The "fathers" sided with the ten spies who showed a lack of confidence and trust in God to help them take the promised land - **Numbers 13:1 – 14:34**.

⁷ Achan's sin was that he took things from the battle at Jericho that he shouldn't have - **Joshua 6:18-19; 7:1, 21**.

⁸ Babies and children who were killed in these biblical accounts of battles are safe with God, because there is no charge of sin against them – **Mark 10:13-14; Ezekiel 18:20**.

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Conclusion:

Most of us don't want to see people suffer. But people must be prepared to face the consequences of their own choices and actions.

Yes, God is a God of love (**1 John 4:8**). But He is also a vengeful God who will punish the wicked (**Romans 12:19**). In **Romans 11:22** we read;

*“Therefore, consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but towards you, goodness, **if** you continue in His goodness⁹. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.”* (emphasis mine – SK)

Some may accuse God of being inconsistent because He shows mercy to some, but not to others. But when we look at scripture, rather than seeing God as being inconsistent, we find the opposite. God has consistently said throughout scripture that the evil-doer will be punished, but the righteous will receive His mercy (**Psalm 1:6; 34:15-16; Romans 2:6-10**).

We may not understand everything that God has chosen to do. But that doesn't matter. There are some things that we just have to leave with Him. What we do need to concern ourselves with is that we live a life that is “*fully pleasing Him*” (**Colossians 1:10**), and that we be ever thankful that He shows His grace and mercy towards those who obey Him.

⁹ *i.e.* remain faithful to God – see **Colossians 1:21-23a; 1 John 1:7**.