

The Goodness and Severity of God

“Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness; otherwise thou also shalt be cut off;”
Rom. 11:22.

In this verse, the inspired apostle mentioned two attributes of God — “*goodness and severity*.” In this verse two sides of God’s character are cited; namely “*goodness and severity*.” God is not all goodness, nor is He all severity. However, this very language is in sharp contrast to the prevailing sentiment among so many in today’s world. Multitudes correctly say “*God is love*” I John 4:8, but they refuse to admit the existence of “*the wrath of God*” (Rom. 1:18). They correctly emphasize the “*goodness*” of God, but ignore the “*severity*” of God, even though both of these attributes are mentioned together in one verse (Rom. 11:22). When it comes to our learning God’s will, intellectual honesty requires that we accept all that the Bible says on any subject. This approach to Bible study prevents one from picking and choosing, and thereby embracing what one finds pleasing, and rejecting what one may regard as displeasing, or going “against the grain.” After all, if one refuses to accept (and believe) what the Bible says about the **Person** of God, is he likely to accept (and believe) what the Bible says about the **will** of God.

Our beginning text (Rom. 11:22) is crucial to the overall context of Romans (chapters nine through eleven), wherein the apostle Paul had so much to say about Jewish rejection of Jesus Christ and His gospel in contrast with Gentile acceptance of Christ and His gospel. The Jews had had certain advantages, especially in that “*unto them were committed the oracles of God*” (Rom. 3:2). Their advantages went back as far as Abraham, when God first called him, to go forth unto a land which He (God) would show him, declaring that He would give Him a land, and from his “*seed*” all nations would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). God raised up a nation (the Jewish nation) out of the loins of Abraham; to that nation He gave the law of Moses (Deut. 5:1-2), which served as a schoolmaster, or a tutor, to bring them unto Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:24-26), Who was born of the lineage of Abraham (Matt. 1:1-17). Jesus fulfilled the Mosaic law (Matt. 5:17-18), and His death resulted in that law being blotted out, taken out of the way, and thereby nailed to the cross (Col. 2:14). Jesus, by reason of His sacrificial death, became “*the Mediator of the New Covenant*” (Heb. 9:15-17). But think of the advantages the Jews had had! The law was given to them. Jesus, according to the flesh, was of Jewish descent (Matt. 1:1-17), being born of the tribe of Judah (Heb. 7:14). When Jesus began His ministry “*He came unto His own (the Jews), and His own received Him not*” (John 1:11). The law and the prophets looked forward to Jesus and His work (Luke 24:44). His labors were among the Jews. When Jesus first sent out the 12 disciples, He specifically told them to go to “*the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (Matt. 10:6). Indeed, the Jews as a people, throughout their history had been the beneficiaries of “*the goodness*” of God. Yet they had repeatedly violated His will, and their greatest defiance of God was evidenced when they stubbornly rejected Jesus, and whose leaders cried out, saying, “*Let him be crucified*” (Matt. 27:22)! Even so, the first converts in this the gospel age were of Jewish nationality (Acts 2:22-41).

However, by the time Paul wrote the book of Romans, the Jews (generally speaking) were rejecting the gospel, and new converts more and more consisted of Gentiles. In fact, if you closely study the ministry of the apostle Paul, you will be amazed to discover that his greatest success was among Gentiles, and his greatest opposition (and even persecution) came from Jewish antagonists. This was the situation when Paul wrote the great book of Romans, the first eight chapters of which may be summed up by saying that Christ and the gospel accomplished what could not be accomplished by Moses and the law. And in chapters 9-11 Paul really delved

into the Jewish-Gentile phenomenon. In chapter 11 he likened the Jews to an “olive tree” (with many of its branches having been “broken off” because of unbelief), and he likened Gentiles to “a wild olive tree” being “grafted in among them” (Rom. 11:17-19). However, Paul let it be known that the Gentiles should not boast or be “highminded” (Rom. 11:20), for, after all, if God “spared not the natural branches” (the Jews who were “broken off” because of unbelief), then they (the Gentiles) should likewise “take heed” lest God would also not spare them (Rom. 11:21). And it is in this context that Paul then exclaimed saying, “behold therefore the goodness and severity of God...” (Rom. 11:22). Indeed, **both** of these attributes of God were clearly set forth in Paul’s “olive tree” illustration.

With regards to the declaration to “behold, the goodness and severity of God,” we have considered the contextual background of those words, but now we shall examine each of the **words** more closely, beginning with:

“Behold!” This word is from *ide* (Greek), and means to look, to see, perceive, and regard. It is in the imperative mood, meaning that not only should we “behold,” but it is something we **must** do!

“The goodness.” This word is from *chrestotes* (Greek). It denotes “goodness” in the sense of what is upright (Rom. 3:12), or kindness of heart or action (Rom. 24; Tit. 3:4). It signifies not only goodness as a quality; rather it is goodness in action, goodness expressed in deeds.

“And Severity.” This word is from *apotomia* (Greek), which is a combination of *apo* (meaning off), and *tomia* (meaning to cut). This word was also used in ancient official writings in the sense of the full provisions of a statute. For example, if a statute called for 10 years’ punishment for a crime, a severe judge would give the full measure.

“Of God.” God’s “understanding is infinite” (Ps. 147:5). We cannot “pull the wool” over His eyes! God is “Almighty” (Gen. 17:1). “With God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). He is therefore fully able to honor His promise, and He is equally able to carry out His threats!

Examples of God’s “Goodness”

1. He created man is His “own image,” Gen. 1:26-27. What an honor it is to be created in the very image of God, and to be given “dominion...over every living thing that moveth upon the earth” Gen. 1:28!

2. Man was originally placed in the Edenic paradise and graciously permitted to eat of every tree of the garden except the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Gen. 2:8-17)!

3. God provided for man a “help meet,” thereby making way for the happiness of man and the perpetuation of the human species upon the earth (Gen. 2:17-24)!

4. God “did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness,” Acts 14:17!

5. From God comes “every good and perfect gift,” Jas. 1:17!

6. God gave “His only begotten son,” John 3:16, Who voluntarily shed His blood that we might be forgiven and redeemed (Matt. 26:28; Eph. 1:7)!

7. God has provided for His obedient, faithful children “*an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven...*,” I Pet. 1:4. Indeed, as the songs says, “God is so good!”

Examples of God’s Severity

1. When man sinned God drove him out of the garden, placed upon him the sentence of death, decreed that women would bear children “*in pain*,” and that man would earn his living by “*the sweat*” of his face (Gen. 2:26, 19, 24)!

2. When man became so exceedingly wicked, **God sent a worldwide flood** upon the earth, and destroyed all but eight souls (Gen. 6:7; 7:17-23; 2 Peter 2:5)!

3. Because of their intense wickedness, God “***rained fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah***,” taking the lives of everyone except Lot and his two daughters (Gen. 18:20; 19:24-30)!

4. God “killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt,” of both man and beast, in one night (Ex. 13:15)!

5. Nadab and Abihu “*offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them...*” (Lev. 10:1-2)!

6. Because of idolatry and perpetual disobedience God sent the northern kingdom into Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 17), and the southern kingdom into **Babylonian Captivity** for 70 long years (2 Kings 25; Jer. 25:11)!

7. Hell, a place “*prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:41), will also be inhabited for all eternity by those who refuse to obey God (Matt. 10:28; 25:46)!

Conclusion: “*There is no partiality with God*” (Rom. 2:11). That being the case, as He has in the past, God will bless the obedient and punish the disobedient. Yes, it behooves us to “***behold the goodness and severity of God***,” and respond to His revealed will accordingly.

—B. Witherington