

**080203 Divine Goodness or Divine Severity—We Choose 23/05 February 3, 2008GG
Gospel Gleanings, “...especially the parchments”**

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Divine Goodness or Divine Severity—We Choose

Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work. What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded (According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;) unto this day. And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway. ([Ro 11:5-10](#))

While we cannot—and should not—reject God’s providential involvement in human history, we also should not blame God for everything that occurs. Divine providence is quite focused and selective. God steps into the human experience with specific purpose. In our study passage He preserves a remnant of His people from Baal worship. Paul applies the Elijah passage to a remnant of Jews in his day who, like the Northern Kingdom in Elijah’s time, failed to follow God’s clearly prescribed directions regarding how and where to worship Him. In Elijah’s time true worship occurred in Jerusalem where the Ark of the Covenant was housed in Solomon’s temple, and where the ordinances of divine worship were administered by His appointed priests, the Levites. When Jeroboam divided the Northern Kingdom from the south, many faithful people from the northern tribes migrated to the south so that they could remain faithful to their God and to His prescribed place and manner of worship. However, God sent Elijah and many other prophets to the people in the north for several generations, always warning them of the certainty of God’s judgment should they continue in their sinful ways and urging them to return to His appointed way of worship in the south.

God clearly affirmed to Elijah that, despite the prevalence of Baal worship in the north and the public wickedness that prevailed there, He still had a people in the north who, though they did not migrate to the south, also refused to participate in Baal worship. Paul compares these people to the Jews with whom he reasons in the Roman letter (also in Galatians). They did not embrace Jesus when He came, but they also refused to follow the Greek and Roman paganism that prevailed in the first century culture. As in Elijah’s day, according to God’s word to Elijah, Paul affirms his belief that these people are God’s children, comparable to the seven thousand.

We are humanly “wired” to polarize our perception of other people. If they agree with us and act like we act, we view them as wonderful people, the “salt of the earth.” If they disagree with us, albeit they refrain from the evil excesses of the wicked world around them, we tack horns on their heads and characterize them as children of the devil. Paul’s analogy of the seven thousand and his comparison of them with the first century Jews with whom he reasons here defies this polarized view. As in Elijah’s time with the seven thousand, God preserves “a remnant” of His chosen people from the excesses of sin that surround them, even though they may not take the necessary steps to find and devote their lives to God’s true way of worship.

In this case God’s providence likely takes on a subtle hue, not an overt earth-shattering fire-from-heaven epiphany that consumes the altar, water, and offerings in the dramatic public setting that we see when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal. God’s law written in the hearts of every one of His regenerate children bears on their conscience and urges them to despise the overt evils of the day. According to Paul, this divine preservation of a remnant is altogether in logical harmony with God’s

eternal election.

I reject the interpretation of this passage that alleges a second divine election of certain regenerate elect to be brought to the knowledge of the truth while other regenerate elect are left in darkness to the truth. "...according to..." in this passage simply means that divine providential preservation is in keeping with God's eternal purpose of election. If all of God's elect shall praise Him perfectly in heaven for eternity, it is logical that God would so reveal Himself to some of His regenerate children in their lifetimes that they would intuitively (spiritual intuition) be repulsed by the overt sins of their culture and would in some way follow God's moral code that He wrote in their hearts at regeneration.

So what do we do with these mysterious seven thousand men or with Paul's application of them to people in his day? Here are some basic points to consider.

1. First of all, we cannot indulge in unsanctified creative imagination and add any number of details that we think they might have done that Scripture does not report. Such an action in any case is a blatant rejection of the accuracy, inspiration, and thoroughness of God's inspired record. It represents the arrogant height of conscious unbelief.
2. 3. They did not migrate to the south to become active participants in God's only form of true worship in that era, a form of worship that centered on the Ark of the Covenant and was administered by Levites according to the pattern that God revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai.
4. 5. They did not seek Elijah out and become ardent followers of his teaching.
6. 7. Elijah didn't seek them out and become their ardent teacher.
8. 9. Notwithstanding the clear absence of any of these actions, God declares to Elijah that He has reserved them so that they did not bow to Baal. He didn't say that Elijah had reserved them without knowing about it. He said that He had reserved them.
10. I suggest that such a people existed in Paul's time, the only reasonable explanation of his insertion of the Elijah example in our study passage and its context. By logical parallel we may apply all the unknowns listed in the above five points to Paul and to his time. God charges us to be vocal and faithful witnesses, but He never allows us to think that we have any sense of the true scope of His amazing, merciful, electing, and saving grace. When we think we know all the external evidences of grace and can accurately predict the spiritual condition of everyone we briefly encounter, God reminds us of Elijah's "God, I'm your only hope in the north," and of His rebuke of the prophet's self-absorption, "I have reserved..." Praise God for grace that transcends our finite assessments and limitations. We should avoid the sinful attitude of ancient Israel. Let us never limit the Holy One of Israel ([Ps 78:41](#)) to the measure of our finite and often inaccurate perceptions and judgments.

What then? Israel hath not obtained that which he seeketh for; but the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded...unto this day. The parenthetical passage that follows this statement explains Paul's intended meaning in these words. Notice what he writes.

(According as it is written, God hath given them the spirit of slumber; eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear)

Paul further explains his point after the parenthesis closes.

And David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompence unto them: Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway.

Why would, or did, God give people sleepy minds that, despite having eyes, they would not discern what they saw? Why would God turn what is a place of safety and nutrition, a table, into a snare or trap? I suggest that in each of these Old Testament lessons God imposes these conditions on people

because of their own stubborn and unrepentant attitudes toward Him. In a verse later in this chapter Paul will warn the Romans, and us, of both God's goodness and severity ([Ro 11:22](#)). He qualifies both divine actions. We experience God's goodness as we continue in His goodness, and as we turn from God into error He promises severity. By his use of personal pronouns Paul clarifies that he applies this warning to God's children, not to unregenerates. His warnings and his use of personal pronouns is applicable to the Roman Christians to whom he wrote this letter. He described these people in the introduction of the Roman letter.

To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. ([Ro 1:7](#))

It is regenerate children of God, "...beloved of God, called to be saints..." kind of people to whom Paul addresses this two-pronged warning in the eleventh chapter.

What is the precise nature of God's moral reaction to His own children when they walk into sin and refuse to repent and turn back to Him? We read a rather precise description of divine chastening in the twelfth chapter of Hebrews. Let me give you a Bible analogy of the same truth.

Blow ye the cornet in Gibeah, and the trumpet in Ramah: cry aloud at Bethaven, after thee, O Benjamin. Ephraim shall be desolate in the day of rebuke: among the tribes of Israel have I made known that which shall surely be. The princes of Judah were like them that remove the bound: therefore I will pour out my wrath upon them like water. Ephraim is oppressed and broken in judgment, because he willingly walked after the commandment. Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness??. When Ephraim saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound, then went Ephraim to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb?: yet could he not heal you, nor cure you of your wound. For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him. I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early. ([Ho 5:8-15](#))

Ah, that amazing Old Testament book of the prophet and the prostitute! Hosea was God's man for Israel—yes, the Northern Kingdom—in his day, but he was not fully prepared to deliver God's message to the rebellious northern people till he personally experienced the same intimate heartbreak that God had experienced by the conduct of His people in the north.

God first announces His anger and intent to judge His rebellious people in the north. In fact Hosea warns both the north and the south of certain divine judgment against their sins. In the closing verses of this lesson we see one of the most informative analogies of God's judgment against His people to be found in all the Bible.

1. *Therefore will I be unto Ephraim as a moth, and to the house of Judah as rottenness??.* God's first warning to His rebellious, sinful people may at times appear as minor irritants to their sinful intent—like a moth darting toward a flame. God calls our attention—to be sure, an irritating, annoying kind of interference—to our sinful designs. The simple knowledge that God is irritated with our ways, enough so that He irritates us, should prompt immediate repentance, but it doesn't always do so.

2. 3. *For I will be unto Ephraim as a lion, and as a young lion to the house of Judah: I, even I, will tear and go away; I will take away, and none shall rescue him.* If we refuse to repent when God irritates our sinful ways, and calls our attention to our sins, the next step is a frightening sense of divine judgment. Hosea does not describe a tired, toothless old lion. He describes a young lion in his pride. The hungry lion is relentless in his pursuit of prey. The roar of a prowling, hungry lion has been recorded five miles away. At times the very noise of the lion's roar paralyzes its prey with fear. When we refuse to listen to God's annoying reminders of His rejection of our sins, the next step is a more ominous sense of

impending divine judgment. We fully expect God to step in and judge us, and we know that we deserve anything He may send upon us. Surely such a foreboding sense of divine disapproval would prompt us to repent and turn from our rebellious ways. Yes, it should do so, and often it does, but not always. It didn't motivate the Northern Kingdom to turn from their sins, did it?

4. 5. *I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me early.* By far the most frightening divine response of the three! If God annoys us like a moth around a flame, repeatedly and annoyingly calling our attention to our sins—and we refuse to repent—and if God appears to us as ferocious as a young lion on the prowl, and we refuse to repent—what can we expect next? What is God's third step of chastening? He steps back, leaves us to ourselves, and becomes deafeningly silent toward us. Simon and Garfunkel popularized a song in their time entitled "The Sound of Silence." Ah, my friends, God's "Sound of Silence" is deafening! It is by far the most frightening of the three steps in the divine program of chastening that aims at each point to jolt us into our spiritual senses and motivate us to turn from our sins and return to Him.

6. The major point we should draw from Paul's teaching in this lesson is this. God never reacts capriciously or without provocation in His loving but fearful chastening to urge us away from our sins and back to Him. When divine judgment turns our breakfast table into a snare, it is not because of some mystical divine plan. There is a reason, and we find the reason in our own sins, not in divine duplicity! God depicts Himself in Scripture as a loving, gracious, and caring Father to His children. While earthly parents may at times take out their personal frustrations at life on their defenseless children, God never does so. If He chastens, it is because of our sins. If He annoys us like a moth, it is because we have refused to follow what He has already taught us about what is right and just. If He roars at us like a young, hungry lion, our own stubborn sins are the cause. Ah, and if He retreats and leaves us with a foreboding sense of divine silence, silence that shouts at us as if broadcast on a public address system with the volume turned to the maximum, it is because we have refused to listen to His clear testimony in our conscience, confirmed by His testimony in Scripture.

Indeed we face two crucial choices in our walk as His children. He is always consistent and always righteous. If we choose to walk in His goodness, we shall encounter one experience of divine goodness after another. But if we fall away from His goodness and stubbornly pursue our own pride and sins, we may fully expect to face divine severity.

After generations of rebellion and refusal to follow the repeated pleas of one prophet after another, divinely sent to call them back to Him, God finally—and I do mean finally—judged the Northern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom eventually lost its identity—its very existence—as its captors forced them into its culture. The nation that was once God's precious people became the despised Samaritans of the first century.

After receiving a personal visitation from God Incarnate, after several years of repeated warnings from Jesus' apostles, first century Jews, many of them God's regenerate children whom both Jesus and His apostles repeatedly called on to repent and turn to Him, faced the deafening "sound of silence" in the summer of 70 AD when the Roman army besieged the city of Jerusalem and eventually sacked the city and turned their beautiful temple into ruins.

We live today in the light of multiple examples from Scripture. We cannot claim ignorance of God's righteous commandments to us. We cannot plead any excuse that justifies our refusal to follow God's commandments. Will we listen to the divine instructions? Will we repent and follow God's way instead of our own? We, fully like the people whom Paul passionately warned, face only two options. We may experience God's goodness, or we may suffer His severity. We choose the course, but He predicts the certain consequences of both choices. How shall we live the rest of our lives—in anticipation of divine goodness or divine severity?