

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

“Behold, The Goodness and Severity of God”

By Bobby Witherington

“Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness. Otherwise you will also be cut off” (Rom. 11:22).

The preceding verse begins with ***“therefore,”*** a word which means “for this reason, consequently, or because of this.” In essence, as used in the preceding Scripture, ***“therefore”*** follows what had already been said about God blessing the obedient Gentiles and punishing the disobedient Jews. Hence, the recipients of this epistle, in consequence of having read the inspired text concerning God’s response to the obedient versus the disobedient, were admonished to ***“consider the goodness and severity of God...”***

“Consider,” as used in this verse, is translated from *ide* (Greek); it is in the imperative mood, and it means to look, see, perceive, or regard. In other words, not only should we ***“consider the goodness and severity of God,”*** it is something we **must** do!

But what are we to ***“consider?”*** We must ***“consider the goodness and severity of God.”*** ***“Goodness”*** is translated from *chrestotes* (Greek) and is used in the sense of what is upright (Rom. 3:12), or kindness of heart or act (Rom. 2:4; Titus 3:4). It signifies not merely goodness as a quality; rather it is goodness in action, goodness expressing itself in deeds.

“Severity” is translated from *apotomia* (Greek), and it denotes “steepness, sharpness” (***Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words***, by Vine). “In the papyri it is used of exacting to the full the provisions of a statute” (*ibid*). To illustrate, if this word were used to describe a Judge in a court of law, the Judge would exact the strongest possible legal sentence. For example, if a given crime called for a sentence of five to ten years in prison, a judge of ***“severity”*** would impose the full ten-year sentence.

Paul did not merely say ***“consider the goodness of God,”*** nor did he merely say, ***“behold the severity of God;”*** to the contrary, he said ***“behold the goodness and severity of God!”***

A great danger in today’s world is that of gaining a one-sided view of God! Not only must we believe that God ***“is”*** (Heb. 11:6); we must also learn something about the very **Person** of God! In His recorded prayer in John 17:3, Jesus said ***“and this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”*** Yes, we should come to ***“know”*** God – not simply that He exists, but Who He really is!

In today’s world we hear so much about the love of God, and that is good, for ***“God is love”*** (1 John 4:8). Because of God’s love, ***“He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”*** (John 3:16). Elsewhere Paul said, ***“God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”*** (Rom. 5:8).

But the same Bible which speaks of the ***“love”*** of God also speaks of the ***“wrath”*** of God. For example, please note Romans 1:18: ***“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”*** In fact, the apostle Paul exhorted the saints at Rome, saying ***“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will replay, says the Lord”*** (Rom. 12:19). In Hebrews 10:30, God also said, ***“Vengeance is***

mine, I will repay, says the Lord,” and then in the very next verse the Hebrew saints were warned that *“it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”* (Heb. 10:31).

There are countless examples in the Bible of individuals (depending upon their relationship with God) experiencing both the **“goodness and severity of God.”** For example, Adam and Eve, the first couple. God had been so good to them! He created Adam **“in His own image”** (Gen. 1:27). Seeing that it was **“not good that man should live alone”** (Gen. 2:18), God created Eve from a rib taken from Adam’s side (Gen. 2:21-24), and placed them in that beautiful Edenic paradise, where they could have been the recipients of every conceivable blessing. However, man who is created in the **“image of God,”** must obey the **will** of God. With this point in mind, we observe that God told the first couple that they could **“freely eat”** of every tree of the garden, except **“the tree of knowledge of good and evil,”** and concerning this tree God said, **“in the day you eat of it you shall surely die”** (Gen. 2:16-17). However, both Adam and Eve, in spite of God’s clear instructions to the contrary, ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:1-6). In consequence, the ground was **“cursed,”** man would henceforth earn his living by the sweat of his face, the earth would yield thorns and thistles, women would bring forth children **“in pain,”** they were driven from the garden, and ultimately, they died! All these consequences of eating of the forbidden fruit illustrates in the most forceful way **“the severity of God!”**

Think about the nation of Israel. Because of God’s **“goodness,”** they were delivered from Egyptian bondage, miraculously preserved, and ultimately privileged to enter into the promised land. However, their **receiving** the land of Canaan was based upon the goodness and promise of God; their being able to remain in that land was based upon their **obedience** to God’s directions. Read Deuteronomy 27:11-28:8, and you will note numerous curses pronounced upon the Israelites if they disobeyed God, and numerous blessings pronounced upon them if they obeyed God. They disregarded His warnings, they turned from God, began to serve idols, and ultimately were carried away into captivity. They experienced both **“the goodness and severity of God!”** And there are many, many other examples which could be cited of those who were exceedingly blessed by **“the goodness”** of God, and of others who experienced the **“severity”** of God.

Regarding the nation of Israel, whether they experienced the **“goodness”** or the **“severity”** of God was not because of the capriciousness or the erratic behavior of God. Rather it was based upon their response to the revealed will of God. To illustrate this point, we think about the prophet Jeremiah; he was called to preach to an apostate nation, a nation which had rejected God and had turned to idols and were facing 70 years of captivity in Babylon. God told Jeremiah to **“say to them”** (the apostate Jews), **“this is a nation that does not obey the voice of the Lord their God nor receive correction. Truth has perished and has been cut off from their mouth”** (Jer. 7:28).

More could be said, but “the bottom line” is this: we need a **balanced view** of God. Thank God for His **“goodness,”** for Scripture says, **“the goodness of God leads you to repentance”** (Rom. 2:4). On the other hand, Jesus warned His disciples, saying, **“do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him Who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell”** (Matt. 10:28).

Read what the Bible says about **heaven**, and you are bound to long for heaven, a place of endless bliss, of incomprehensible glory and beauty. There is no way any one of us could deserve to go there. But the fact that such a place is prepared for a prepared people proves conclusively that **“God is love,”** and His **“goodness”** is beyond our comprehension.

On the other hand, read what the Bible says about **hell** (yes, there is such a place!), and if you believe the Bible you will want to avoid that place at all costs! But the fact that such a place exists means also that God is a God of **“severity!”**

Conclusion: Let us all obtain a balanced view of God. By so doing, we will grow in our love for God, it will motivate us to obey God, and to tell others about God! ■