

## The Severity of God

Lectionary Readings: Isaiah 1:10-18; Psalm 32:1-8; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

We like to think of God as nice, very loving, very welcoming, and very, very okay with us. God loves us just the way we are. God is essentially a god of love. Many mainstream churches like ours have emphasized these sentiments to counteract some extremely damaging views about God put forward by fundamentalists, militant Catholics, and many evangelicals. Untold numbers of people—especially women and girls but also boys and men—have been traumatized by churches that taught them that God is a violent judge with very clear rules—on pain of everlasting hell—about what women can, and cannot be and do, about who people can, and cannot, love, and so forth.

People really do need to hear the truth that God is essentially loving and welcoming, that God desires that people across all races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual preferences live in peace without any dominating the others, that God is pro-love whatever its manifestation, and so on. If we depart from this message, we depart from the Gospel.

Nevertheless, there is a danger lurking in this message. The message can blind us to the severity of God that is necessary for God's purposes of reconciliation. This severity is plainly expressed in today's Old Testament reading and Psalm.<sup>1</sup> The prophet Isaiah addresses the rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah, people who are very religious: these people routinely assemble on the sabbath, make sacrifices to God, offer prayers, and celebrate festival days. Sounds a lot like us. But, the word of the Lord, Isaiah says, is not one of welcome, but just the opposite: I'm sick of your sacrifices and offerings, the Lord says. Your incense is an abomination to me. I can't stand your solemn assemblies. I hate your festivals. When you reach out to me, I won't even look at you. I won't listen to your prayers.

Ouch. That's harsh. But, if God is a welcoming god who loves us just the way we are, how is it that God could respond to these people's attempts at being related to God with such fierce rejection? If God is essentially loving, why does God respond so severely to these people? Is God's being *severe* consistent with God's *perfect love*?

---

<sup>1</sup> See *Isaiah* 1:10-18 and *Psalms* 32:1-8.

I think the answer has to be “yes” and that it would do us some good to clarify this severity. Let us start by considering what Christians of all stripes have always maintained: God is in the business of rescuing us and redeeming us. The popular term for this is “salvation”. But, we need to ask: salvation *from* what, and *for* what? I think too often Christians have badly misunderstood the nature and purpose of this salvation. Too often we’ve understood it by analogy to a typical human rescue operation. A man has fallen off a cliff, is injured and unable to climb to safety. A rescue team flies in by helicopter, places the man in a rescue basket, and whisks him to the hospital. He has been saved.

Too often Christians have thought God’s salvation is like this. For all willing to ask for forgiveness for their sins, God forgives them and, at their deaths, God whisks them away to heaven. They are rescued from this world of sorrow to be deposited in heaven where there are no more tears. But, this picture of salvation leaves out a huge and crucial part of the story. To live in a world without tears would require our becoming people who can *live in peace* with everyone else. It would be a world in which we don’t hurt others due to our selfishness or pride or prejudice. Clearly it would be a world in which we, each of us, would be very different than we are now. Hence, the title of one of Rob Bell’s books: *Jesus Wants to Save Christians*.

So, God’s salvation is a monumental task. It is so much more morally robust than the popular narrative suggests. To appreciate the point, suppose you want to hire a pianist for a wedding, and you have people audition by playing a little for you. One guy by sheer luck plays something that sounds pretty good, but he hasn’t been playing for long and hasn’t practiced much; he just happens to play something nice-sounding by accident. Another auditioner has practiced a lot, persevered through challenges, and learned from her mistakes; with hard-earned skills she plays you something nice-sounding too. That’s the person you want to hire to play at your wedding. The first guy would be a disaster. Now suppose God just plucked up someone with a bad character and plopped him into heaven. He wouldn’t be fit to live there any more than the first auditioner would be fit to play piano at a wedding. To become someone we’d want for that job, he’d need to develop new skills by frequent practice and training, admit when he made mistakes, and learn from them so he could avoid them in the future.

So, it is with our spiritual lives.

God's salvation is a process by which we are transformed from people who are captivated by sin into people who are fit to live in heaven. The teachings of both Jesus and Paul clearly tell us that we must be transformed, and that this transformation will be very challenging. If all that really mattered is that we go to heaven when we die, then Paul would not have spent most of his writings exhorting us to imitate Christ, to become the body of Christ by a transformation of our minds so radical that we literally learn to think and act like Christ. If the popular narrative were all that really mattered, then Jesus would not have told his followers to be perfect as their heavenly father is perfect. He would not have said that following him would take us on a path of dying to self and service to others.

Only when we have been transformed into people whose wills are aligned with God's will can we ever develop the habits of mind and action that can make us fit to live in God's kingdom. As the philosopher Paul Moser puts it: "The heart of God's wisdom is eager conformity to God's perfect will, come what may".<sup>2</sup> We need a volitional makeover toward God's perfect will. Thus, we should expect God to challenge us at the level of our will. But, we shouldn't expect God simply to zap us, violating our own wills, because God is perfect and thus would not coerce us into doing God's will.

God's salvation is a process whereby God offers us power to be transformed, little-by-little, with our permission, into the likeness of Christ. This offer can be welcomed or rejected. It always comes as a challenge, for it's always an offer to *change* what we're already doing. It calls us away from our habitual selfishness, pride, and prejudice, and toward conformity to God's perfect will. I don't think God ever stops offering this gift to us, but it is up to us, any time it is offered, to accept it willingly or to reject it.

So, let us ask, given the moral seriousness of God's salvation, might God's dealings with us sometimes be *severe*? I think the answer must be "yes". Perhaps we can begin to understand this by considering a human example. I have a friend who has a grown daughter. She was violated sexually when she was young, and, as is often the case in situations like this, during her teen years she had intense, post-traumatic experiences that she soothed with drugs to the point of serious addiction. You can imagine the family drama that ensued. You can imagine the lies and deceptions she told herself and her family as they attempted, time after time, to aid her with counseling and rehab. Several times her parents paid her tuition for college, but each time, she'd go back to

---

<sup>2</sup> Moser, Paul K., *The Severity of God* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 31.

drugging and then drop out of school. She tried working various jobs, but they never lasted long before she was fired. Over and over my friend and his wife bailed their daughter out, paid her rent, and so forth. But, eventually her parents decided that they would have to stop bailing her out, for her own sake. It was the hardest decision they had ever made. It was a very severe move. Their beloved daughter was now truly on her own. There was no guarantee it would end well. But, they did it because they loved her enough to realize that if she was ever going to get better, they were going to have to stop enabling her. She was going to have to get so low that she'd have to make a life-or-death determining decision for herself.

Now, our question is this: When her parents made the severe move of removing all financial support to their struggling, drug-addicted daughter, did they do it out of real love for her sake?

It seems to me that the answer could be “yes”. Perhaps the story can help us appreciate how God’s dealings with us can be severe at times. For, *we are that daughter*. We are gripped by the power of sin and we cannot make ourselves righteous on our own. We need divine aid. The Christian story is that it is offered to us, but God is not going to violate our wills and moral agency. We will have to receive it willingly. And what we must receive is not a mere Get-Out-Of-Hell-for-Free card. No, God offers a long, arduous process of moral transformation whereby our old habits die and new ones arise by hard work. God’s help—God’s grace—is not cheap. “Work out your salvation”, Paul says, “with fear and trembling”.<sup>3</sup> Severe treatment might well be needed.

So I think Isaiah was right to give us a picture of God’s severity. Notice that today’s Psalm also testifies to divine severity. “While I held my tongue”, the Psalmist writes, “my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long. For *your hand was heavy upon me* day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer”.<sup>4</sup> We don’t get the details, but it’s clear enough that the Psalmist was getting some heavy-handed treatment from the Lord.

The reason for this severe treatment is made clear in the rest of the Psalm. The Psalmist is full of transgression and sin. The Lord’s heavy-handed treatment is needed for the Psalmist to see this. The same goes in our passage from *Isaiah* in which God

---

<sup>3</sup> *Philippians* 2:12.

<sup>4</sup> *Psalms* 32:3-4.

speaks severely to the people. Despite their religiosity, their actions are far away from God's righteousness. They may think they are doing well, but they are out of line with God's justice, which requires rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. It's very important that we realize that God, being perfectly good, opposes anything that obstructs righteousness.

A very clear theme in all our readings for today is that the first step in accepting God's challenge to transformation is realizing one's own captivation to sin. If we don't, God may need to withdraw from us, perhaps severely, so that we can see our real state. Perhaps then we can ask for forgiveness and then work with God toward changing our ways. This apparently happens in today's Gospel reading. When Jesus calls Zacchaeus, he responds as a repentant sinner: "... half my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much".<sup>5</sup> Zacchaeus illustrates the pattern: willingly accepting God's will always results in action.<sup>6</sup> You can almost hear Jesus' delight as he exclaims: "Today salvation has come to this house. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost".<sup>7</sup>

One final point: It is important to realize that, at that moment of decision when Jesus calls Zacchaeus, Jesus didn't zap Zacchaeus and force him to repent. Just as Zacchaeus could have rejected Jesus's invitation, we, at any point, might reject God's invitation and remain in our old patterns of selfishness, pride, and prejudice. If we do so, we will act in ways that obstruct righteousness, and we shouldn't be surprised if God opposes us, perhaps even severely, in keeping with God's redemptive wisdom.<sup>8</sup> Let's not forget that Jesus severely opposed some Pharisees, calling them a "brood of vipers", and he turned over the tables of the money changers in the temple. If Jesus can respond with severity consistent with love, then we should expect that God can respond to us, depending on what we do, with severity consistent with love.

So, as we rightly preach God's love to a world a world in great need of hearing the good news, let us also be aware of the righteous severity of God. It may not be what we'd prefer, but it may be just what we need to help us on our way to becoming fit to live in God's kingdom.

---

<sup>5</sup> Luke 19:8.

<sup>6</sup> In today's epistle, Paul celebrates the Thessalonians for their *works* of faith and *increasing love* for one another despite persecutions and afflictions. See 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 19:9-10.

<sup>8</sup> See Moser, 39.