

Romans 9:15-16 The Justice of God – 2

Paul's First Illustration – God is more than just

Was God just in choosing one man, Abraham, and from him one nation, Israel? Is God fair in choosing some and seemingly, not others? Paul gives two illustrations, both from Exodus, to conclude, in different ways, that God is more than just: He is merciful. However, in His mercy He retains His absolute sovereignty.

The first illustration is taken from Exodus 33:19. However let us first consider a parable Jesus told (Matthew 20:1-16). In it, labourers are hired for the day for a denarius. Other labourers are also hired, at different times during the day, and sent to work in the vineyard. At the end of the day, those hired last were paid a denarius. Those hired first expected to be paid more, but they too are given a denarius. They cried out, "It's not fair!" But the Master said, *Am I not allowed to do what I want with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?* The parable is about grace. The Master wasn't being unfair, he was being more than fair, he was generous with what belonged to him. The sovereignty and generosity of God exposes our sinful tendency to envy. Or can we rejoice with those who rejoice?

We find the same sort of ideas in Romans 9: *For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* (Romans 9:15). This verse is part of a longer section in Exodus which is a passage of high drama. After experiencing God's mighty power through the Exodus from Egypt; and having experienced the greatest revelation of God given to mankind at Sinai; the Israelites became impatient with Moses as he was up the mountain. They decided to make an idol of gold in the form of a golden calf, and they engaged in revelry. As Moses came down the mountain he broke the two tablets as a sign that the people had broken the covenant. God was angry enough to destroy them and start over again with Moses (Exodus 32:9-10). But Moses interceded for the people, *"Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written."* (Exodus 32:31-34). This is very interesting because it is similar in tone to Paul's 'prayer' in Romans 9:3 where he said, *For I could wish that I myself were accursed.*

God would not allow Moses or Paul to be blotted out, but God agreed not to blot out His people Israel (though there would be consequences for their sin.) Moses then prays a second time (Exodus 33:12-16) and pleads that God might show him His ways so he could lead the people. The Lord answers positively, *And he said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."* (Exodus 33:19-20). The Lord then hides Moses in the cleft of the rock, covers Moses with His hand, and passes by, and proclaims His Name.

So why does Paul use Exodus 33:19 in Romans 9? It suits his purposes because it demonstrates the mercy and sovereignty of God. Three times the Lord says, *I will*. This has some parallel with Exodus 3:14, where the Lord proclaims His name, *I AM WHO I AM*. At the heart of God's Name is His sovereign ability to be entirely self-determined in all that He is and does. He does not need us, we need Him. Like a good parent, God is in charge, not us. This sovereignty of God lies at the heart of our Christian and Baptist confession: Jesus is Lord. On a practical level, this can be a real struggle for

us, but one we need to overcome, because God is not only sovereign, but He is also good. As we accept God's sovereignty we will discover that He is more than merciful.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by C.S. Lewis, Lucy asks, "*Then he isn't safe?*" "*Safe?*" said Mr Beaver; "*don't you hear what Mrs Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.*"

In the context of Exodus 33 God would have been well within the bounds of His justice to wipe the Israelites out and to start again with Moses. However the Lord heard Moses prayer, and said, *I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.*

What comes next is a seminal moment in the history of Judeo-Christian faith. Moses is hidden in the cleft of the rock and the Lord passes by, and proclaims His Name. *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."* And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped (Exodus 34:5-8). The sin of the Golden Calf demanded God's justice. Instead we get an astonishing revelation of God's mercy. Judaism has called these The 13 Attributes of God's mercy. The Psalms and the prophets repeatedly refer to this revelation. We see that God is merciful and gracious, as in the parable of the prodigal son. He is slow to anger, not wanting any to perish, but for all to come to a knowledge of the truth. He is *abounding* in steadfast love and faithfulness. *He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities* (Psalm 103:10). He forgives sin and iniquity.

So then it depends not on human will or exertion but on God who has mercy (Romans 6:16). Neither our own will, nor any exertion (lit. running) is good reason for God's mercy, but 'it', that is, God's mercy, depends on ... God's mercy!

However, even when we appreciate something of God's abundant mercy and accept His sovereignty, we can be forgiven to not quite getting the doctrine of election! But God is God and we don't get the whole picture. Even the great Moses didn't get the whole picture: *you shall see my back and not my face* (Exodus 33:20). Even Moses couldn't fully comprehend the actions and purposes of God in the world.

The Apostle Paul said, *For now we see through a glass darkly* (1Corinthians 13:12). So we walk by faith and not by sight. This has much application in the church. Although we have tasted, none of us has the whole picture. This is why God has given many gifts, and we all have something to share, whoever we are. There is a God-shaped hole for each one in the church and in this world, which God has designed for you alone to fulfil.

1Co 13:12 *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*

In the world to come, Paul says, the dark glass will be removed, and the revelation will no longer be limited to seeing His back; it will no longer be limited to knowing in part by only hearing the name of the Lord proclaimed. We will see him face to face, and we shall know even as we are fully know by him.