

The Severity of God

Even if we make all allowances for the general existence of suffering in the world as a consequence of the Curse, and also for our own limited understanding of God's ways and purposes, there still appear to be a number of specific instances in the Bible where God seems unnecessarily cruel. These incidents in Scripture of seeming cruelty have been offered as an argument by critics, saying that such a *flaw* in God's character proves that the God of Scripture could not really be God.

Though we will never be able to fully understand God's dealings because our *finite* minds are incapable of comprehending the *infinite* mind of Almighty God. We would do well not to put ourselves in the position of trying to judge God. We must always keep in mind Genesis 18:25, which states, "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*"

Despite the fact that man has no jurisdiction over God, Who is not necessarily bound by the laws which He has established as moral standards by which man is to be judged. We can, nonetheless, *partially* understand why, in these particular incidents where God seems unnecessarily cruel, He dealt with man the way He did, when we look carefully at the *total* context in which these incidents occurred:

How, for example, could a loving God have ordered Moses to utterly destroy the inhabitants of Canaan [Deuteronomy 7:2], even the *children* [Joshua 6:21]? And what about the time when Elisha cursed the children who were jeering him, and God sent two bears out of the woods who "*tare forty and two children of them*" [2 Kings 2:23-24]? On one occasion God commanded Saul to "*go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass*" [1 Samuel 15:3]. Then, when Saul instead spared Agag, the Amalekite king, as well as all the best of the animals, God judged Saul severely, even deciding to take away his kingdom and instructing Samuel himself to execute Agag. "*And Samuel hewed...(hacked)... Agag to pieces before the Lord in Gilgal*" [1 Samuel 15:33].

Similar instances of apparent divine cruelty are found throughout the Old Testament. All the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed by fire and brimstone out of heaven, and the entire world of the antediluvian is destroyed by water.

*How can such incidents possibly be reconciled
with the idea of a God of love and mercy?*

1. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE CANAANITES

God ordered Moses to "*utterly destroy*" the inhabitants of Canaan [Deuteronomy 7:2], which, according to Joshua 6:12, included even the *children*! Since this action does, indeed, seem *severe* on God's part, the following will help answer our questions as to why God would order this annihilation of the whole nation of the Ganaanites.

The alternative to the destruction of the Canaanites was the corruption of God's people and interference and long delay in the accomplishment of God's purposes. God had warned the Israelites this would be the case if they failed to carry out His command of complete destruction, and this is, of course, what happened.

When God first called Abraham to go into the land of Canaan, He promised the land to him and his descendants. At that time, however, the promise was delayed in its implementation because, as God said, "*the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full*" [Genesis 15:16]. In Joshua's time, however, the Amorites and all the other inhabitants of Canaan had become so depraved that there was no remedy except destruction. The awful morass of idolatry and its accompanying moral wickedness, into which these nations had descended, is documented not only in Scripture but also by archaeology,

Both Scripture and archaeology document the fact that Canaan, as well as many other nations surrounding Israel, had become terminally ill with an awful cancer. . . the cancer of idolatry and all its accompanying moral wickedness. And, because the living culture of Canaan had become so saturated with demon worship, there was nothing left for God to do but to "*cut out (destroy) the cancer.*"

The result of Israel's failure to carry out God's order to execute all the Canaanites was that they, too, were soon infected by the moral degradation of those whom they had spared.

Years later David would write, "*They did not destroy the nations, concerning whom the Lord commanded them, but were mingled among the heathen and learned their works, and they served their idols, which were a snare unto the,. Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and their daughters, when they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood. Thus were they defiled with their own works, and went a whoring with their own inventions, therefore was the wrath of the Lord kindled against His people, in so much that He abhorred His own inheritance*" [Psalm 106:34-40].

God ordered Israel to execute all the inhabitants of Canaan simply because He knew that this terrible tragedy would result if all of the inhabitants of Canaan were not destroyed. Who can calculate how many Israelites lost their eternal souls because of this contamination? Cruel as God's command may seem, it was really more merciful on God's part that the Canaanites be destroyed than that their pollution spread further to other peoples. It was this demonic control of Canaan, and other antediluvian nations such as Sodom and Gomorrah, which brought about their own tragic end.

One reason for God's apparent severity was to teach His chosen people both the exceeding wickedness of sin and also His own faithfulness and power. Although we may not understand fully all of the factors involved, it is at least clear enough that God had adequate reasons for commanding the destruction of the Canaanites.

If this was true of the case of the Canaanites, it was surely true also in the case of the antediluvian...[those who lived *before* the flood]...and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. In the case of the people's of Noah's day [perhaps also the Canaanites), there may well also have been still another factor, that of *universal demonic control* of the people to be destroyed.

2. THE TWO BEARS THAT "TORE UP" FORTY-TWO CHILDREN

The story of 2 Kings 2:23-24 is another example of what appears to be extraordinarily severe punishment on God's part for what seems to be mere childish rudeness. However, since there is much more to the story than what appears on the surface at casual reading of the text. Reading from the King James Translation, the following recounts the story:

*"And he...(Elisha)...went up from thence...(that is, from Elijah's translation into heaven. Elisha had **just** succeeded Elijah and this was his first act of ministry)...unto Bethel: and as he was going up by the way, there came forth little children out of the city, and mocked him and said unto him, God up, thou bald head: go up, thou bald head. And he turned back, and looked on them, and cursed them in the name of the Lord. And there came forth two she bears out of the wood, and ate forty and two children of them."*

- A. First, one should note that the place where this story takes place is **Bethel**, the place where Jeroboam had set up his golden calf. Because Elijah's revival had affected this place, which, according to 2 Kings 2:3, was where his "*school of the prophets*" was established, there was real tension between the demon Baal worshippers and Jehovah's prophets, namely Elijah, and now Elisha!

- B. Secondly, one should note that this incident takes place immediately after Elijah's supernatural translation, where there appeared "*a chariot and houses of fire . . . and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven*" [2 Kings 2:1. Elisha had just picked up Elijah's mantle as a sign of his having witnessed Elijah's ascension and the fact that he was the one appointed by God to succeed Elijah's ministry. It is under these circumstances that he approaches Bethel where there was such contention between demon activity and Jehovah, the great God of Israel. It was "*show-down*" time!
- C. Thirdly, one should note that the Hebrew word that is used here, which is translated in English as "*children*," does not mean, "*small teen-agers*," but, rather, it has reference to "*young men!*" In fact, the same word is used of Behoboam in 2 Chronicles 13:7 and he is **41 years old** according to 2 Chronicles 12:13.

These were **NOT harmless little children** who greeting Elisha that day, but, rather, they were young stapling hoodlums who were being spurred on by demonic Baal worshippers.

- D. Fourthly, one should note that Scripture indicates that it was, very likely, a ***large crowd*** of delinquents that come out and was menacing Elisha. The Bible does not say that there were only forty-two of these hoodlums, but, rather, that forty-two of them were "*mauled*" by the two she bears. Which means that, perhaps, there could have been a couple hundred or more of them because, while only "*forty-two*" of them were "*mangled*" by the she bears, there can be little doubt that, as the two bears came out of the woods and began to attack this crowd of ruffians, many of them, if not most, would have scattered.

The fact that only **two** bears could "*tear forty-two*" of these gangsters is another real indication that there was a large mob of these hoodlums because it explains how, as they sought to get out of the way and escape these two bears, in their hysterical confusion, they would have stumbled over each other and trampled one another, accounting for the large number that were mangled.

- E. And, lastly, one should note that, when these hoodlums referred to Elisha as "***thou bald head***," they were not just *taunting* Elisha, but, rather, they were, in effect, calling him a priest of Baal since *shaving of the head* was a pagan religious practice of the Baal priests and was, as Deuteronomy 14:1 tells us, strictly forbidden to the people of God. Thus, these hooligans calling Elisha "*bald head*" was an intentional, blasphemous, insult directed toward a prophet of God and it was their way of telling Elisha to prove to them that he was a man of God. Their ridiculing and scoffing him was, essentially, saying to him, "*You claim Elijah went straight up into heaven, why don't you too, 'go up thou bald head: go up thou bald head . . . thou prophet of Baal.'*"

There can be little doubt that this mob intended to harm Elisha, maybe even kill him. However, even if Elisha had not been killed by the mob, his authority and position as God's prophet - Elijah's successor in Israel - would have been destroyed had God not acted decisively in this situation.

So, once again, when one evaluates the situation, and sees that for God not to have done that which, to us seems so severe, would have been the *less good* alternative, one can better understand that God's punishments are not, in fact, as unjust as they first appear to be.

Although, throughout Scripture, there are other incidents, besides the ones cited, where it seems that God has dealt with man with a kind of unjust severity, these particular incidents have been the ones cited simply because they are the ones that have been most frequently used as examples of God's supposed "*cruelty*" by those who, as we mentioned earlier, wish to prove that there is some kind of flaw in God's character. Despite the fact that these explanations, or any other explanations, for that matter, of the "*why*" behind God's dealing with man may not always satisfy those who have a low concept of God's sovereign authority and awful holiness, one must, nevertheless, not only never apologize for God's actions, as though he were somehow embarrassed by Him, but one must also issue an urgent warning to those who presume to judge God and have been admonished by God's Word not to do so. [See Romans 9:14, 20, and others]

One must also keep in mind that, according to 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, the days of God's severity have not yet ended!