



The



God's Mercy & Wrath

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THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S MERCY & WRATH

Rom. 9:19-23; Ezk. 33:11

By Pastor Alfred J. Poirier

Mysteries abound all about us. They are no less found in the sciences as in the humanities. They are not so much hidden, as they are woven into the deep fabric of our existence. They are a part of us as much as the air we breathe and the light we walk in.

For example, at this very moment you are bathed in light, both natural and artificial. You take this for granted. You rely on it, you use it, you cannot live without it. Yet, the very nature of light remains a mystery and continues to perplex physicists. At the heart of this enigma is the *seemingly unreconcilable* theories of general relativity and quantum mechanics.¹

Are you surprised? You ought to be. Creation is God's idea and fully reflects the depth and mystery of God. We ought not, then, be surprised when we encounter mysteries in our study of God and his ways. It is the nature of most mysteries to confront us with two *seemingly unreconcilable* sets of facts, in our case, two sets of Scriptures. In this article, I shall focus your attention upon one such mystery.

¹John Boslough explains; "While general relativity allows for a perfect point like singularity at the beginning of time, quantum mechanics does not, for it prohibits defining at the same time the precise location, velocity, and size of any single particle or singularity," in his book *Stephen Hawking's Universe* (Morrow: New York, 1985) p. 57 as cited in R.C. Sproul's *Not a Chance: The Myth of Chance in Modern Science and Cosmology* (Baker Books, Grand Rapids, 1994) p. 53

The mystery concerns God's will. And it is this: Certain verses of Scripture depict God's will as one which wills that none should perish, while on the other hand, there are other verses that declare that he wills not to save all.

To better understand this mystery, let's organize our thoughts along three lines:

1. First, we'll define the problem;
2. Then, we'll examine three typical (and foolish) ways people handle such a dilemma;
3. Finally, we'll learn how best to approach Biblical difficulties so that we can grow in our love and knowledge of the greatness and glory of God.

There are a number of you, maybe the majority, who desire to move from the milk to the meat of God's word. You desire to know your God and the splendor of his ways. May this article contribute to that end.

#1. What is the Problem?

First, let's just set side by side seemingly contradictory verses. For example, *If* Rom. 9:18 is true that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and hardens who he wants to harden," *then* John 3:16 appears false, "that God so loved the world..." Which is it? Does God love the world or harden some?

Or again, listen to Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem in Matt. 23:37: "**O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.**" Is Jesus sincere in his grief? Does he truly long to gather his people together? And does he not say that the *fault* lies with them—they were not willing?

Yet, doesn't Rom. 9:16 declare the opposite, that salvation is alone God's work? "**It does not therefore depend on man's**

desire or effort, but on God's mercy." If a man is to repent, must not God first make him willing?

Or again, in Luke 19:42 Jesus bemoans the fact that the gospel is hidden from the people: "If you ...**had known...** what would bring you peace—but now it is *hidden* from your eyes." Yet, doesn't Jesus contradict this when he says with joy in Mt. 11:25-27 "I praise you Father...because you *have hidden* these things from the wise and learned...?"

Furthermore, in the next verse Jesus asserts" "**No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**"

So how can Jesus weep that the truth is hidden, when he praises his father for hiding it from the wise? How can Jesus weep over those who do not know the Father, when it is he himself who chooses to reveal or withhold the truth to whomever he wills?

Not to tire you, let me list a few more examples of this dilemma where we find many expressions of God's indiscriminate love for the lost and yet equally the truth that people are saved only if God chooses to save them.

Examples of God's expressions of love and mercy are: **Ezk. 18:32** "**...I take no pleasure in the death of anyone,' declares the Sovereign Lord. 'Repent and live.'**" Again, in Ezk. 33:11, **Say to Jerusalem, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather, that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'"**

Yet again, in 1 Tim. 2:4, we are told that "**God wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth,**" and in 2 Pet. 3:9 that "**God...is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.**"

We know these passages well. We know this is God's heart we hear. It is *He* who pleads and implores sinners to repent.

However equally clear as these expressions of God's mercy and love are, there are those declarations which assert that conversion is *sovereign* grace. It is a work of God. If a man repents, it is because God has turned him. So Acts 13:48 "**...and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.**" That is, only those God appointed to eternal life believe.

We saw in Ezk. 33:11 God calls his people to repent. Yet, when we are given a window to the workings in a person's heart, what do we find? ***It is God*** who is changing her heart. So we are told in Acts 16:14, "**And the Lord opened her [Lydia's] heart to respond to Paul's message.**"

Summary of First Point: So there is our mystery. Two sets of Scripture which seem to contradict each other. On the one hand God issues a sincere plea for sinners to repent. On the other, it is He alone who converts the sinner's heart and grants it the grace of repentance.

#2. What Are We Not to Do?

So what do we do with these texts? First, let us look at three ways people typically (and foolishly) handle this problem.

- 1. Commit spiritual suicide.** Some people just admit what seems obvious to them. They say these verses not only appear contradictory, but they are contradictory. They assert that the Bible is full of contradictions. Hence, they reject the faith wholesale.
- 2. Play the Ostrich:** Another group of people plays the ostrich. They stick their heads in the sand and deny there is a problem. They just don't like to deal with anything that might cause

them a bit of thinking. Only believe what is manageable and easy.

- 3. Cut and Paste:** Finally, some take the route of picking and choosing what they like in Scripture. The rest they discard. These people, in effect, make their own Bible—the cut and paste version of the Bible. Thomas Jefferson did. Not able to believe the New Testament account of Jesus’ miracles, Jefferson cut them out of his Bible. Jesus healing the blind, casting out demons, and rising from the dead—these he threw in the trash. The ethical teachings of Jesus he liked, so these he kept.

Most of us are not so brash or blatant to treat Scripture this way. But, in fact, don’t we do so at times? We exclude from our reading some Scriptures. Others we dwell on. And in doing so, we deny God as the author of all of Scripture. We denigrate his wisdom and demean his goodness in recording for us his words and giving them to us for our good.

If, then, we are not to commit spiritual suicide, play the ostrich, or cut and paste a Bible made in our own image, what should we do?

#3. What Are We to Do?

1] Be Humble. Humility is a vital virtue. So let such mysteries humble you. The great Dutch theologian, Herman Bavinck, begins his work on the *Doctrine of God* with these words: “Mystery is the vital element of Dogmatics (i.e. Theology)...The truth which God has revealed concerning himself in nature and in Scripture far surpasses human conception and comprehension.”²
~~Ask yourself this: Is a god whom I could understand exhaus-~~

²Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, 1977) p. 13

tively, and in whom I found no mystery whatsoever, be a god worth worshiping? Would not such a god be an imaginary god, a god no greater than my own little imagination, an idol, but not the God of the Bible?

Does not the Lord God Almighty say: **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts”** (Isa. 55:8-9)?

So let the difficult things in God’s word humble you, and remind you whose word, mind and purposes it is that your little mind is attempting to comprehend—they are God’s!

2] Hold fast these two truths together. You already do this with many other mysteries. Do you not confess that God is one yet three? That Jesus is fully God yet fully man? That God is sovereign and man fully responsible? That the infallible word of God was written by God using fallible men? Hold fast these two truths.

3] Thirdly, be assured that, though these two truths, though now looking like enemies, are friends. Refuse to regard that which appears contradictory as *actually* contradictory. Though seeming to be rival alternatives, in a way you have yet to grasp, they are complimentary. Though they look poles apart, they are in truth intertwined, embracing, like lovers in a dance.

4] Finally, be diligent in your study. Halfheartedness is never commended to those who would know God. **“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart,” says the Lord** (Jer. 29:13). As in the search for all wisdom, says Solomon, **“You will understand the fear of the Lord if you call out for insight...and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure”** (Prov. 2:3-4). With these in mind, let us

apply this last one to the problem before us.

God pleads with the wicked to repent, yet only he can give them the gift of a new heart and the grace of repentance. Can then God still be considered sincere in his call to the wicked? To answer, let us look at two things: the infinitely complex emotional life of God, and the infinitely complex motives of his will.

#4 Considering God

1] God's Infinitely Complex Emotional Life. First, let us consider again the magnitude of our question. We seem to be faced with *conflicting* motives and emotions in God. He says he doesn't take pleasure in the death of the wicked. Yet, he doesn't choose to save everyone. There is complexity here.

But is this any more complex than God hearing your prayers? Have you ever thought what it must be for God to hear ten million prayers? How does he hear us each, personally and individually, as a caring Father? How can he truly weep with one who weeps and rejoice with one who rejoices, *at the same time*?

God's emotional life is seen to be infinitely complex. Who of us can say what complex emotions are *not* possible for God? This consideration should give us caution—knowing what appears to us as contradictory may just be complex.

2] The Infinitely Complex Motives of God's Will. At this point, let us consider another complexity—the motives of God's will. Look at Deut. 28:63. There we read: **“Just as it pleased the Lord to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you.”**

Now clearly, since there is no actual contradiction in God, we can only understand this to mean that the word “please” must be taken in two senses. In one sense God does delight in the death of the

wicked, to execute his judgment upon them. And in another sense, he doesn't delight in their death, in his judgment.

Theologians have rightly seen that there is a necessity to distinguish two wills in God: God's *secret* will and his *revealed* will. God's *revealed* will is what he commands in Scripture, what he expresses to man. God's *secret* will is what he infallibly brings to pass in the world (see Deut. 29:29).

And here a picture is appropriate. Think of God's will as a camera with two lenses. One kind of lens is for close-ups, the other kind is for wide-angled shots. The closeup lens is like God's revealed will; the wide-angled lens is like God's secret, or sovereign will.

God's revealed will is focused upon a virtue, action or a creature's happiness in an absolute sense. In itself it is the close up.

God's secret or sovereign will, is his desire for that virtue, action or happiness not considered absolutely, but with respect to the universality of things—God's overall plan. It is God's will looked at through the wide-angle lens.

So, God's revealed will, like a closeup lens, when focused singularly upon the death of the wicked, or a creature's suffering or destruction, takes no pleasure in it. Yet, in God's sovereign will, like a wide-angle lens, when focused upon, and in consideration of, the greater picture, God's larger purposes, his ultimate glory and our happiness, he is willing and pleased to punish the wicked and not to save them. This we saw already in Rom. 9:22-23—that God chooses to display his righteous wrath, his holy justice, and awesome power, in order that the object of his mercy may see clearly that it is mercy we have received from God!

3] An Analogy from George Washington. Finally, let us look at an analogy from life. A major part of wisdom is learning to see relationships in seemingly disparate and unrelated things—as

when Jesus sees how a sower sowing his fields is like God spreading his word. One wise man, Robert Dabney, a great 19th century theologian, saw how this problem is similar to a situation George Washington once had to face.³

During the Revolutionary War, a British officer by the name of Major John Andre, was sent to meet with the traitor Benedict Arnold, but *enroute* was caught and jailed. Since he had discarded his soldier's uniform for civilian clothes, when captured he was liable to be treated as a spy; and thus, to be executed.

Andre was a young man, a mere 21 year's old. Though on the side of the British, his captors came to admire his youthful zeal, the courage of his conviction, as well as his brilliance—he was learned in literature and music. Even George Washington came to respect him deeply and greatly.

Yet a decision came for our nation's first Commander in Chief. A difficult decision. Should he have Andre executed or pardoned? Says a biographer: *perhaps on no occasion of his life did the Commander in Chief obey with more reluctance the stern mandates of duty and policy.*” Dabney remarks, “*Washington had full power to execute or save. His compassion for the criminal Andre was real and profound. Yet he signed the death warrant with spontaneous decision*”⁴

Dabney then asks us to consider someone defending Andre who overhears Washington, as he signs the death-warrant, say: “I do this with the deepest reluctance and pity.” What if this defender should counter: “Since, General Washington, you are supreme in

³Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, (Banner of Truth Trust: Carlisle, 1967) vol. 1, p. 282-318.

⁴*ibid.* p. 285

the matter, by your signing this warrant your pity is hypocritical.” Wouldn’t the insolence of this charge be equaled only to its folly?

For the pity of Washington was real, but it was restrained by superior elements of motive. His desire to pardon was counterpoised by a complex of rational and superior judgments (in keeping with his) wisdom, duty, patriotism and moral indignation.⁵

Do you see how this analogy helps us think more deeply about our problem—how God can, in one sense, desire that none should perish, and yet for reasons complex and superior, desire to express his wrath and execute his just judgment against the wicked?

Like Washington, God’s compassion for the wicked is not feigned, but real, a true and sincere call to repent. Yet, in the case of the non-elect, God’s will not to see the wicked perish is counterpoised by a complex of superior motives and judgments in keeping with God’s wisdom, his justice, his moral indignation, his greatness and his glory.

If such complexities of motives are found in a decision made by the Father of our nation, *how much more* complex are the motives in the decisions made by our heavenly Father.

Conclusion:

We have wrestled with a single mystery—God’s will toward the wicked. At first sight it appeared to us that Scripture contradicts itself. We then examined three foolish ways in which people typically handle such difficulties: committing spiritual suicide, playing the ostrich, or remaking our Bible to suit our taste.

⁵ibid.

Instead, we considered the best approach to take with such thorny issues as 1] to humble ourselves before the greatness of God, hold both truths fast as friends, not enemies; and 2] to diligently study and think and pursue wisdom in the hope of gaining a better understanding of God's ways.

We did this by recalling that God's emotions and motives are infinitely complex. Then, we sought to understand this complexity of God's motives and emotions by use of two analogies; 1] likening God's will to a camera with two lenses—a close-up and wide-angled lens; and 2] by relating the story of George Washington who himself had to make a very complex decision.

My prayer is that this study has helped to remove for you some of the clouds and allowed you to peer a bit at the brilliance of our Great God. Hopefully, you can now sing with greater conviction what Moses sang long ago: **“Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you? Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonder” [Ex. 15:11]**. May what looked like a stumbling block, now be seen all along to have been a stepping stone to a greater knowledge of God.

May these things humble your hearts, strengthen your faith, and cause you to fear and revere the Lord more. And may you especially sense the Lord calling to you even now as he did to Jeremiah” **“Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know” [Jer. 33:3]**.

