

The Untamable God

Scripture Text: Romans 9:14–18

Introduction

In C.S. Lewis' "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," Lewis told a story of four siblings who find their way into the land of Narnia by going through a magical wardrobe. The story revolves around the children's interactions with Aslan, the king of Narnia. The children, Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy, first learn of Aslan through Mr. and Mrs. Beaver. Lucy, the youngest, assumes Aslan is a man. Upon discovering that he is really a lion, Lucy asked the question, "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." This statement that Aslan, the lion king, was both unsafe and good provides a simple and yet complex picture of Aslan. He was both. Aslan was both a lion that is not tame, and he was still full of goodness.

The same can be said of God. God is good (all the time), but He is not docile. If you try to subdue Him, you might lose an arm, or worse. God in the Old Testament roars like a lion. God in the New Testament is the Lion of Judah. The God of the universe is an untamable lion. Not many people today want to think that God is dangerous. We hear much about how God is love, or God is just, or God is holy, and indeed He is all of those things. But, God is dangerous or God is Judge are not popular descriptions for our Heavenly Father. That is an unfortunate oversight. It is dangerous because we tend to replace the majestic, holy, awesome Lion in Scripture with a domesticated kitten measured by our human standards. Who wants a God Who roars, Who threatens, Who judges? Why not rather fashion a god in our own image—a friendly god we can pet, leash and safely come on our own terms? The problem is, that is a false god!

God is Not Fully Known...and That is Good

The truth is that God is a lot of things, but probably most helpful for us is that God is not like us. We should not assume He is like us. We often project our humanity onto God and forget that it is we who are made in His image, not vice versa. When Scripture speaks of God's wrath, it is a righteous, holy wrath that should not be confused with our sinful anger. The two are night and day. When Scripture speaks of God killing someone, it speaks of something that God has every right to do since He is the One Who gave life. We work hard to establish equality among people, and that is very good, but we are wrong to project that same equality toward heaven and say, "God, You have to play by the same rules we do." He doesn't. God is God and He can do what He does without explaining anything to us or conforming to our standards of Who we think He should be.

God is also not fully known. What we know about Him is what He has chosen to reveal to us about Himself. Some things would be much simpler if we did not have them in Scripture. For instance, would it not be easier if God was one and we did not have this thing called the Trinity? Would it not also be better if we just had passages about God's love, our need for Christ, and God's desire for none to perish? Would it not be better if

we had none of those pesky passages that speak of God's election, choosing, calling, drawing, and predestining? God loves us, we have the will to choose Him for ourselves, and that's all. Would that not be a much simpler view of God and us? It probably would, but that is not the God Who is revealed in Scripture. We do not have all the answers and sometimes it seems that we have conflicting answers. This passage reveals some of the mystery of our faith, and that is a good thing. When we confine God within some very simple parameters, we do not limit God, we limit our own spiritual life.

God is Free to Do as He Pleases

Last week, we read about God's sovereign choice and saw examples of Him choosing one person over another. Since God chose Jacob instead of Esau before they were born and without regard to how good or bad either of them would be, someone might raise the question: Is God just in choosing one person over another? Is He right to do that? Paul anticipated this objection and wrote the following response.

Romans 9:14 ¹⁴ *What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means!*

Paul wrote a strong negative response to this question: Absolutely not or God forbid this. Throughout history, God had been just in His dealings with Israel, even in His choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau. To prove that God was just, Paul quoted something God told Moses: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Why would this be an answer to the objection that God was unjust? Would that answer your concerns about God being a just God? It might sound like God was arbitrary. To better understand this statement, we should look at the situation where Moses wrote this. God had punished the Israelites for worshipping the Golden Calf. God then told the Israelites to depart for the Promised Land, but He said that He would not go with them. Moses then pleaded with God that they should not go into the Promised Land without Him, because the world would not know that they were His chosen people. God then responded to Moses like this.

Exodus 33:17-19 ¹⁷ *And the Lord said to Moses, "This very thing that you have spoken I will do, for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name."* ¹⁸ *Moses said, "Please show me your glory."* ¹⁹ *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.*

God said that Moses had found favor in His eyes, and that He would do what Moses had asked. Moses then asked God to show His glory. That is when God answered, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Why would God answer in this way? How is God's choice about whom He would show mercy and compassion an answer to Moses' request for God to show His glory? The reason is that whether God shows His glory, His mercy, His compassion, or

anything else is *entirely up to Him*. He has the sovereign will to choose what He does and what He reveals to us. It is His prerogative and that is OK.

God Acts Justly for His Purposes

Since God is sovereign and can choose how He interacts with anyone, He is completely just in everything He does. To claim that God is not just or fair is to say that God must act according to how we think He should. God is just when He chooses one person for a particularly purpose and rejects another, such as with Jacob and Esau. He is also just when He chooses to be merciful to some and not to others. Jesus taught the same truth in the parable of the vineyard workers when He said, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (Matthew 20:1-15) Since all of creation belongs to God, He is perfectly free to make such choices. We, too, make the same decisions. If you gave money to one beggar but not to another, or if you forgave one debtor but not another, would you be unjust? Of course not. You chose to be gracious to one where you could have justly chosen to be gracious to none. The same is true for God. He does not owe mercy to anyone, but He is merciful to some.

We may think this is unfair, but we ought to remember the purpose for which God does what He does. Paul mentioned this in verses seventeen and eighteen when he gave an example of God’s dealings with Egypt. Before Pharaoh freed the Israelites from Egypt, God had orchestrated a series of events for the purpose of proving Who He was.

Romans 9:17–18 ¹⁷ For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.” ¹⁸ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

God put Pharaoh in power, sent Moses to him, delivered the plagues upon Egypt and even hardened Pharaoh’s heart *for the very purpose* of showing His power and proclaiming His name throughout the whole world. Some may say that this sounds like the workings of an egotistical person focusing too much on himself, but remember, God is God. He is not man. We should not project our own humanity on Him. Whatever God does He does for His glory. He acts for His purposes.

God’s Mercy is Not Based on Our Efforts

Some will object to all of this and say such things as, “What about our ability to choose?” or “What about my ability to do good?” How does God’s will and work interact with human will and work? Well, Paul even addressed that in verse sixteen.

Romans 9:16 ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.

After Paul quoted God’s dealing with Moses and His sovereign ability to choose who will receive His mercy, he went a step further to address our part in it. The New Living

Translation puts it this way: So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it. I think that is an accurate rendering. God's mercy is not something you can choose for Him to give. It is also not something you can work to get.

In many translations, it mentions about a person not being able to run for it. Many people "run" a whole lot in an attempt to earn God's favor. We see this word used in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. When the son who was lost returned home, the father saw His Son from afar and he "ran" to his son. He exerted himself to reach his lost boy. The thing is that the father in that parable is not us — it is God. God is the one willing and working and running to us. We cannot work or run for our own salvation. So it is God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose for God to be merciful on us nor can we work to receive it. We cannot do enough to earn God's mercy. It is entirely up to Him. Where else have we heard this? Paul wrote about it in another letter.

Ephesians 2:8-9 ⁸ *For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*

Salvation is a gift. It is something given by the grace of God. It is never earned and it is never a result of what you do. It is God's work so that no one who receives it can ever say, "Look at what I have done. Look at what I have earned." Now, some will object that this removes our ability to choose Christ. Some will say that this absolves us of our responsibility to repent of our sin and accept Jesus Christ by faith. I cannot explain it, other than to say Scripture actually mentions both. God shows mercy to whomever He chooses. God also calls us to repent, which means we are to willingly turn from our sin. God also desires for no one to perish but for all to be saved. How does God's sovereign will work with our call to repentance and His love for the world? Only God knows. We see throughout Scripture the interaction of God's will, His love, our responsibility, and our choice to turn to Him. It is part of the mystery of our faith and the mystery of our God. He does not fit nicely into our limited human understanding. He is God!

Conclusion

So, how shall we respond to this passage? I think it would be helpful for us all to re-evaluate Who we think God is. Do you picture God as a tame lion Who is docile and safe? Do you picture God as the "Man upstairs" Who is distant and uncaring. Maybe you think God is just there for when you need Him? He is none of that. He is a lion, but He is also a good King and Father. One thing we should not forget is that God is merciful. Maybe the question should not be why God is merciful to some and not others, but why is He merciful at all? What motivates God to have mercy and compassion on any of us? We do not deserve it, yet He freely gives it. Only God knows. The fact that God does not fit into a nice package that makes sense to us actually makes Him more magnificent. If we can accept that God is far bigger than any of us can understand, I think we will be able to appreciate and worship Him more. What we can know is that God is good and just, that we need Him, that He loves the world, that Jesus Christ is the Way to salvation, and that God desires for all people to be saved. Do you believe that?