

Deuteronomy 32:4 (Opening)

4 *“The Rock, his work is perfect,
 for all his ways are justice.
A God of faithfulness and without iniquity,
 just and upright is he.*

Introduction

What makes someone a bad person?

I don't mean what can a person do to be classified as a bad person; but what is it that makes a person become bad, or evil?

There's lots of evil around us in the world. There has been since the beginning of time. Usually the evil people who are in positions of power are the ones that we hear about, because they have the opportunity to do the most evil.

Would we remember Herod the Great if he hadn't been evil, and ordered the death of all the male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem? Would we remember Nero if he hadn't persecuted the Christians?

I got curious and looked up the top 10 most evil dictators of the past 130 years, and was actually a little surprised by what I found. I'll only mention the highlights (or low-lights, as it were).

Number 7 on the list is Pol Pot, the leader of the Communist movement in Cambodia, who systematically exterminated around 1.7 million people that didn't fit his idea of desirable for the country.

Number 6 on the list was someone I hadn't heard of, Ismail Pasha, who was responsible for directing the Armenian Genocide between 1915 and 1922, and was responsible for around 2.5 million deaths. In fact, he was the reason the word genocide was coined.

Let's jump up to some of the more familiar ones. Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany in WWII was only number 3 on the list, with 17 million deaths. Joseph Stalin, leader of the Soviet Union from the mid 1920's to 1953, and a contemporary of Hitler, was number 2, responsible for 23 million deaths. But the number one most evil dictator over the past 130 years was Chairman Mao Zedong, the first

leader of Communist China, who was responsible for somewhere between 49 and 78 million deaths during his rise to power and his leadership of the country, between 1927 and 1976.

So, why do I bring all this up? Because Paul, in this section of Romans chapter 9, discusses the evil leader of another country that all the Jews knew about, and how God interacted with him.

Romans 9:14-18

¹⁴ What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! ¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 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's Will

Paul just finished writing about how Isaac was chosen over Ishmael, and how Jacob was chosen over Esau, despite how tradition dictated that the older was to receive the blessing and the birthright. There was a perception of injustice. But over and above that, there was a perception of injustice because Paul was saying that even though they were Jews, that they needed to believe and obey Jesus as their Messiah to be saved. The Jews believed that they were saved simply because of being Jews, being the children of Abraham. Paul pointed out in Romans 9:6-13, our scripture for last week, that that wasn't the case.

To clear up the perceived injustice, Paul begins by quoting from Exodus 33. Moses is talking to God prior to going back up on Mt Sinai to get the replacement stone tablets to replace the ones that were broken. Moses

asks God to continue traveling with the Israelites when they leave the base of Mount Sinai.

Exodus 33:17-23

*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."
²⁰ But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live."
²¹ And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock,
²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by."
²³ Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen."*

What does God mean when He tells Moses "I will be gracious on whom I will be gracious and show mercy on whom I show mercy"? And why, when Paul quotes it in Romans is mercy first and then compassion?

Well, here's part of the problem. The Hebrew words used in Exodus 33 can be translated in English as mercy, compassion, gracious, or caring. So, let's just go with Paul's translation of the Hebrew into Greek here. Paul says mercy and compassion. But what's the difference between the two?

Compassion

Let's look at the two words in reverse order, because for some reason that makes more sense to me. So we'll look at compassion first.

Merriam-Webster dictionary defines compassion as "a sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it."

Basically, compassion is when you want to do good things for people who you think deserve it. You see the pictures of the starving children in some third-world country, and you want to help them; you feel compassion toward them. Those kids haven't done anything wrong, they are innocent victims. Compassion is the desire to make things right for the innocent.

Take a look at Lamentations 3:31-33. For this scripture, I'll use the New International Version because it reads better than the other versions.

Lamentations 3:31-33

*³¹ For no one is cast off
by the Lord forever.*

*³² Though he brings grief, he will show compassion,
so great is his unfailing love.*

*³³ For he does not willingly bring affliction
or grief to anyone.*

Trying not to take this scripture out of context, God won't abandon His children; even though we face trials and pain, He is compassionate toward us.

Compassion is another word for agape love. When you give compassionately to someone, you don't expect it to be repaid. You do it for the benefit of the person receiving it, not for your own benefit.

Mercy

So, now that we've looked at compassion, what is mercy? We'll go back to the Merriam-Webster dictionary for help again.

Mercy is compassion or forbearance shown especially to an offender or to one subject to one's power; also: lenient or compassionate treatment.

Did you notice the difference? Mercy is compassion for someone who doesn't deserve it. Let's take a look at Proverbs 28:13.

Proverbs 28:13

¹³ *Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper,
but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.*

So what is Paul telling the church in Rome when he quotes here from Exodus 33?

He sums it up in verse 16 of Romans 9. You can hope all you want that God will have mercy on you, and you can try really hard with all your strength and ability to earn His mercy, but it just won't work. You can't do anything to earn God's mercy. And I say mercy and not compassion; because by the definitions from earlier it's mercy we need because we're not innocent.

God's Purpose

In verse 17 of Romans chapter 9, Paul takes a slightly different direction with his discussion on how God is interacting with the Israelites. Paul brings up the topic of Pharaoh.

All the Jews knew the story of Moses and Pharaoh. They heard it at least once a year during Passover. Pharaoh was the ultimate bad guy for the Jews, and Moses was used by God to free the children of Israel from Egypt.

Paul quotes from Exodus 9:16. We'll start reading in verse 13.

Exodus 9:13-21

¹³ *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me.*

¹⁴ *For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your*

servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. ¹⁵ For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. ¹⁶ But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. ¹⁷ You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. ¹⁸ Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. ¹⁹ Now therefore send, get your livestock and all that you have in the field into safe shelter, for every man and beast that is in the field and is not brought home will die when the hail falls on them.” ’ ’ ²⁰ Then whoever feared the word of the LORD among the servants of Pharaoh hurried his slaves and his livestock into the houses, ²¹ but whoever did not pay attention to the word of the LORD left his slaves and his livestock in the field.

God had a purpose for Pharaoh. In verse 15 God says that He could have easily taken Pharaoh and all of Egypt and just wiped them off the map, but He didn't because He had a plan. God "raised up" Pharaoh, but what does that mean?

Well the same Hebrew word is used in 2 Chronicles 9. This is the Queen of Sheba, talking to Solomon. She had heard about Solomon while she was in her country, but couldn't believe all the fantastic things she'd heard, so she had to see for herself. She was so impressed with Solomon that she said that he was twice as wise as she had been told! Then she says this in verse 8.

2 Chronicles 9:8

⁸ "Blessed be the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and set you on his throne as king for the LORD your God! Because your God loved Israel and would establish them forever, he has made you king over them, that you may execute justice and righteousness."

I underlined the word establish, because that's the same Hebrew word translated as raised up in Exodus 9:16. God established Pharaoh as the ruler over Egypt and protected him from his enemies so that, at the right time, God could show His power to the world, and specifically to the Israelites, so they would believe in Him, and carry His name to the world.

But God didn't make Pharaoh evil. He didn't have to. God knew Pharaoh's nature, and knew how he would react to Moses' presentation to him. Several places in Exodus it says that Pharaoh hardened his heart. Several other places it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. And several more places it just says that Pharaoh's heart was hardened.

Pharaoh made his own choices based on his past experiences, on what Moses said to him, and the miracles God did through Moses. God didn't interfere with Pharaoh's free will, but He knew how Pharaoh would react based on his heart.

In Isaiah chapter 6, when Isaiah is called to be a prophet for God, God explains what having a hard heart will do to our understanding and communication with God.

Isaiah 6:8-10

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." ⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people:

*" 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'*

*¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,*

*and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*

Had Pharaoh not hardened his heart, things would have turned out differently in Egypt, but that was not what God had planned. God knew that Pharaoh wouldn't turn to Him and obey, so God used Pharaoh to demonstrate His power.

Conclusion

So, what can we learn from all this?

Well, first off, God is not unjust, and not capricious. He doesn't make arbitrary decision. He doesn't randomly pick some people to be good and some to be bad. And He doesn't design people to be good or bad.

We're all made the same way, and our environment and our decisions make us the way we are. What's amazing is that God uses us for His glory, sometimes even when we're not following His ways.

Basically, we learn that God is in control, and He is merciful to whomever He wants to be merciful, and He is compassionate to whomever He wants to be compassionate. He can push us in particular directions, but ultimately we need to choose life and good, or death and evil.

Have you made that decision yet? Are you a follower of Christ? Have you chosen good over evil, life over death? The best time to talk to someone about making that decision is now, before it's too late.

2 Peter 2:9-10 (Closing)

⁹ *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.* ¹⁰ *Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Study

2 Chronicles 19:4-7

⁴ *Jehoshaphat lived at Jerusalem. And he went out again among the people, from Beersheba to the hill country of Ephraim, and brought them back to the LORD, the God of their fathers. ⁵ He appointed judges in the land in all the fortified cities of Judah, city by city, ⁶ and said to the judges, "Consider what you do, for you judge not for man but for the LORD. He is with you in giving judgment. ⁷ Now then, let the fear of the LORD be upon you. Be careful what you do, for there is no injustice with the LORD our God, or partiality or taking bribes."*

Job 8:3 (Bildad the Shuhite)

² *"How long will you say these things,
 and the words of your mouth be a great wind?*
³ *Does God pervert justice?
 Or does the Almighty pervert the right?*
⁴ *If your children have sinned against him,
 he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.*
⁵ *If you will seek God
 and plead with the Almighty for mercy,
⁶ if you are pure and upright,
 surely then he will rouse himself for you
 and restore your rightful habitation.*
⁷ *And though your beginning was small,
 your latter days will be very great.*

Job 34:10 (Elihu)

¹⁰ *"Therefore, hear me, you men of understanding:
 far be it from God that he should do wickedness,
 and from the Almighty that he should do wrong.*
¹¹ *For according to the work of a man he will repay him,*

and according to his ways he will make it befall him.
¹² *Of a truth, God will not do wickedly,
and the Almighty will not pervert justice.*
¹³ *Who gave him charge over the earth,
and who laid on him the whole world?*
¹⁴ *If he should set his heart to it
and gather to himself his spirit and his breath,*
¹⁵ *all flesh would perish together,
and man would return to dust.*

Psalm 92:12-15

¹² *The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*
¹³ *They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.*
¹⁴ *They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,*
¹⁵ *to declare that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

⁵ *This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—* ⁶ *since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,* ⁷ *and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels* ⁸ *in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.* ⁹ *They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might,* ¹⁰ *when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.*

Romans 13:1-7

¹ *Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.* ² *Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.* ³ *For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval,* ⁴ *for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.* ⁵ *Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience.* ⁶ *For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.* ⁷ *Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.*