

The Goodness of the Lord

Psalm 116

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I have a friend who lives about a mile from the beach. When I say that now, it is not that big of a deal. Our church is about a mile from the beach. But back in the day, I was living in Texas, and this friend was living in southern California, Redondo Beach to be exact. I told him I was going to be in California and he said, "Come stay with us." Mark was my youth pastor when I was in high school, and he has been a friend and mentor for many years. So I showed up at Mark's house. He is always very friendly and welcoming, but this time extremely so. He sent me out to take a walk on the beach. He warmed up the hot tub in his back yard. We went golfing together. He grilled steaks on the barbecue. I love Mark, but this was a little unusual. He was really wining and dining me. About the third day I found out why. He said, "I'm preaching Sunday, and I'm kind of stuck. I want you to help me write my sermon". Well, that was a small price to pay for such warm, generous, and fun hospitality. So I asked what he was preaching about.

He said it was the story in the book of Acts where Paul and Silas are in a prison in the town of Philippi. They are stuck in chains in a deep and dark prison when there is an earthquake and God sets them free. Then he said what he wanted to do was tie that story in with a phrase that he loves and that he said he uses often with his congregation. I asked him about the phrase. He said he calls out to his congregation, "God is good!" And they respond by saying, "All the time." As I listened to Mark I thought, "This is too easy. Talk about low hanging fruit." I practically shouted at him, "Mark, can't you see how perfect this is? Just tell the story from the bible and every once in a while cry out to your people about God being good and let them respond. Try something like this..."

Paul and Silas had come to the town of Philippi. They baptized some women at the riverside and then they started preaching in the town. When they drove a demon out of slave woman her owners got mad and Paul and Silas got in a little trouble with the authorities and were thrown into jail. But don't you worry about that, because God is good...all the time.

- *They were stripped and beaten...*
- *They were severely flogged...*
- *They were locked up in prison...*
- *A guard was set outside their cell...*
- *They shackled them up tight and put their feet in stocks...*
- *Late at night, at midnight, at the darkest time of the night, when things looked their worst...*
- *Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God*

Because God is good...all the time.

- *Paul and Silas were singing and praying*
- *It was midnight, but Paul and Silas were singing and praying*
- *Suddenly there was a mighty earthquake*
- *The foundations of the prison were shaken*
- *All the prison doors flew open*
- *Everybody's chains came loose*
- *The chains on Paul and Silas came loose*
- *They were set free...they were free...they were free at last. Thank God Almighty they were free at last.*

Because God is good...all the time.

At that point I got up and started walking away. Mark stared at me and asked what I was doing. I said you have your sermon. We're done. Is the hot tub warm? Can we go golf again? How about a walk on the beach? But even though I thought I had given him a pretty good sermon, he sat there with a troubled look on his face. I was being silly and playful, but he was serious. He was struggling. Finally he said, "After I say, "God is good" and my people respond, "All the time", then I say to them, "All the time" and they say, "God is good." I should have seen that coming. We sat quietly for a while. He was telling me the sermon isn't done if we just say, "God is good all the time." We have to say the second part, the part that goes, "All the time God is good."

Oh yes, we get to shout and celebrate when the gospel leaps over geographic and cultural and ethnic and religious bounds and people like a woman in Philippi named Lydia believe and get baptized all on the same day. But when we say, "All the time God is good," we are also putting our faith in a vulnerable place. There are times we share the gospel with others and they don't respond, they don't believe, and they don't rush to be baptized. And it is not just when we share with people of different culture from different places with different backgrounds. Sometimes it is with those closest to us. Young people with a faith that is on fire go to school and trying to be a witness for Christ just hurts. You see people chasing after all kinds of false gods and offering themselves up to practices that promise fulfillment and leave you nothing but empty, and yet when you tell your story that you have found life in Jesus Christ, you might get ignored, you might even get mocked and ridiculed, and at times it even leads to rejection. And I wonder how many here have someone in your life you have been praying about, someone you love, someone who has not responded to the message of salvation, someone who has turned away from this message of salvation, someone who has just shown no interest in the message of salvation, someone who has found another way to live and it does not include worshiping Jesus Christ, God's Beloved Son. Because you know this person, because you love this person, because you long for this person to experience the healing and wholeness that comes through Christ, it requires the deepest of faith to say, "All the time God is good."

Paul drives a spirit out of a slave woman and we clap our hands. “God is good all the time.” But what about those demons that stick around? What about those demons that haunt a person? What about addictions that raise their ugly head? What about the anguish and hell people experience as they struggle with a variety of “spiritual” battles? All the time...all the time...God is good.

I love it when God sends an earthquake to rattle those prison walls and set Paul and Silas free. It was a clear sign that Caesar, the emperor of Rome, might be able to raise armies and levy taxes and build roads and make laws, but try as he might, Caesar would never be Lord. Try as he might, Caesar would never be the Son of God. That title and that place and that person belonged to a carpenter from Nazareth whose preaching and teaching inspired a following and whose healing hand brought a wholeness that was fully realized when his death and resurrection brought an end to everything that was old and passing away and brought the beginning of the new life that will one day culminate in the coming of the very kingdom of God with all of its glory and grace and beauty and majesty and wonder and awe. No, Caesar is not Lord. His prison walls cannot stand against the power of Almighty God.

But I have to admit in the short term those earthly rulers can sure set up oppressive regimes. The power to persecute, to imprison, to declare war, to destroy, and to oppress inflicts so much pain and suffering. That story gets told often in the history of the world. That story gets told often in the Bible. When Paul and Silas were thrown in prison, and shackled with chains, it was not the first time the people of God were enslaved and beaten and humiliated. There was a place called Egypt. When a Pharaoh came to power that did not Joseph or his family, a long and cruel oppression reigned over the people of God. They cried out to God, and they cried out to God, and they cried out to God, and those cries hung in the air for hundreds of years. Sometimes the prison walls come crashing down in a single night. And sometimes those walls are all we know for year upon year. Sometimes we get beaten down so low we can barely hear the notes of hope in the gospel message.

Yes we say God is good all the time. We say it and we believe it. But we also know that when we say all the time God is good, that all the time part is tough. It is tough because there are times when we question, when we struggle, when we hurt, when we suffer, when we doubt about the goodness of God.

The Psalmist doesn't quite say, "God is good all the time", but he comes pretty close. "Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you." And later, "How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?" (Psalm 116: 7, 12) And yet at the same time, this great affirmation of the goodness of God does not turn a blind eye to the suffering and struggle of life. The psalmist reveals how difficult life has been. "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow." (116:3) Trouble and sorrow and the cords of death entangling him, he knew times of deep suffering. His testimony is that God was present in the depths of despair. His testimony is that God acted to save him. "Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, save me.'" (116:4)

I hold before you a book that is a witness to the God who is good...all the time. I hold before you a book that is a witness to the God who all the time is good. If you ripped out the pages in the Bible that speak of suffering and struggle, disappoint and despair, you would have a slim volume. And you would have a dishonest witness, a false testimony. The witness of the Bible is not that everything is perfect and life is without struggle. The witness of the Bible, and of the saints who lived and wrote to tell about it, is that in the midst of a world where there are tears, where there is sadness, a world where knees get skinned and hearts get broken, a world where the ravages of sin and oppression and injustice and violence take a heavy toll, there is a God, and this God is fully present, and this God is full of power. And...this God is good. This God is good and he is always working, even when we don't notice it. This God is always working to bring healing and wholeness, redemption and salvation.

The Apostle Paul does not say, "God is good all the time, and all the time God is good," but he comes pretty close. In Romans 8:28 Paul writes, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." This is the same Paul who was in prison that night in Philippi when there was a great earthquake. He had been beaten and severely flogged. In some of his letters he chronicles the many disappointments he experienced, the difficulties, the rejection, the suffering, the hardships of life. And then here in Romans he makes an incredible affirmation of faith. "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him."

If you read a bit earlier in the letter to the Romans, Paul gives a witness to how God works through suffering. In chapter five he writes, "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." (Romans 5:3-5) When you experience suffering, and find out God is present in that suffering, and that God is powerful in that suffering, you begin to realize God really does work all things together for good. Suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint.

And just in case we feel alone during our trials, abandoned during our tribulations, it is right after Paul writes about suffering and perseverance and character and hope that he shines the spotlight on Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ suffered. God's beloved Son suffered. That in itself is enough for us to say when we suffer we are not alone. God is with us. Jesus Christ is with us, to strengthen us, to shelter us, to sustain us. Not only is Jesus Christ with us, this Jesus Christ who suffered, he suffered to prove that God loves us. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

Knowing that Jesus Christ suffered, and that in his suffering and death God proved beyond a shadow of a doubt just how much he loves us, that gives Paul the confidence and the faith to say, "All things work together for good for those who love God, and have been called according to his purpose." Even something that seems so bad, like the cross, like the death of Jesus, God takes what is the worst thing that could happen to God's very own Son, and he brings good from it. He brings salvation. He brings the healing of the world. I guess you could say, "God is good all the time..." and kind of wave at suffering and sorrow as if it didn't really exist. But when the Bible gives witness to the God who is good all the time, it is a compelling confession of faith that says, "All the time...all the time...even in the deepest and darkest moments of despair...all the time God is good.

During the time with our children this morning we heard Jesus ask a question. "Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" The implication is that even though we as humans, we as human fathers are full of all kinds of faults, if a human father knows how to give a good gift, how much more does God know how to give good gifts to his children?

In a book written nearly 150 years ago, this wonderful author named AB Bruce writes about those words of Jesus where he says that God, our Father in heaven, knows how to give good gifts to his children. But what he writes is powerful because he does not deny that sometimes it is hard to believe that what God is doing is good. He refers to those times in life when we ask for bread, and what God gives us seems like a stone. He refers to those times we ask for an egg, and what God gives us seems like scorpion. He uses the disciples as an example. They were praying for Jesus to be king. Instead he ended up on the cross. At that moment they must have felt that God was not doing a good thing. They asked for an egg, and God gave a scorpion. He gave suffering and death, rejection and defeat. When Jesus died on the cross, his disciples thought it was the worst thing that ever happened. It wasn't until God raised him from the dead, when their eyes were opened, when their hearts were burning with love, that they could say...that they could sing...that they could shout, "God is good...all the time. And all the time...God is good."

On this Father's Day, I'm thinking about our Father in heaven, and that example Jesus gives of a Father who knows how to give good gifts to his children. This past spring we had an Easter Egg Hunt for the kids of the church and the kids of the community. The weather wasn't so good on the day of the Easter Egg Hunt, so we filled all the eggs with candy and treats and we hid them in the sanctuary. We had one hunt for the smallest kids, one for the ones a bit older, and we even had enough eggs so that our teen helpers were able to have their own Easter Egg Hunt. This sanctuary echoed with sounds of joy and laughter. We all went home with happy hearts.

But when we arrived for worship the next morning, we found out the Easter Egg Hunt was not finished. Even though we thought the kids had looked under every pew, in every corner, and under every cushion, some people found an Easter Egg. And when they opened it, there was a treat or a piece of candy. We had one happy congregation that Sunday. We were getting ready for our Maundy Thursday service, The Living Tableau. Andy Wallace said we needed a few more men to portray the disciples in the Tableau, and so I jokingly said if you found an egg, it was a sign that you needed to fill one of the roles in our Tableau. A man found an egg, showed his wife, and she said, "Go sign up to be a disciple." Sure enough there he was on Maundy Thursday. And he did a fine job.

Well, we continued to find Easter Eggs for the next several weeks, and I could tell when someone found one. They would hold up that treat or piece of candy with a twinkle in their eye. I thought we were all done when Andy told me he found one final egg. Then he said something interesting. When he opened the egg, it was empty. No treat inside. No candy. What a dud. What good Father gives an Easter Egg that is empty? There should be a treat, a prize, or at least a Snickers Bar inside.

When Andy told me the final Easter Egg was empty, a story I heard years ago came to mind. Harry Pritchett, Jr. told the story. "Once upon a time I had a young friend named Philip. Philip lived in a nearby city, and Philip was born with Downs' Syndrome. He was a pleasant child—happy, it seemed—but increasingly aware of the difference between himself and other children. Philip went to Sunday school. His teacher was a friend of mine. He taught the third grade at a Methodist Church, and Philip was in his class, as well as nine other eight-year-old boys and girls.

My Sunday school teacher friend is a very creative teacher. Most of you know eight-year-olds. And Philip, with his differences, was not readily accepted as a member of this third grade Sunday school class. But my friend was a good teacher, and he had helped facilitate a good group of eight-year-old children. They learned and they laughed and they played together. And they really cared about each other—even though, as you know, eight-year-olds don't say that they care about each other out loud very often. But my teacher friend could see it. He knew it. He also knew that Philip was not really a part of that group of children. Philip, of course, did not choose nor did he want to be different. He just was. And that was just the way things were.

My Sunday school teacher friend had a marvelous design for his class on the Sunday after Easter last year. You know those things panty hose come in—the containers that look like great big eggs. My friend had collected ten of these to use on that Sunday. The children loved it when he brought them into the room. Each child was to get a great big egg. It was a beautiful spring day, and the assigned task was for each child to go outside on the church grounds and find a symbol for new life, put it in the egg, and bring it back to the classroom. They would then mix them all up, and then all open and share their new life symbols and surprises together one by one.

Well, they did this, and it was glorious. And it was confusing. And it was wild. They ran all around, gathered their symbols, and returned to the classroom. They put all the big eggs on a table, and then my teacher friend began to open them. All the children were standing around the table. He opened one, and there was a flower, and they ooh-ed and aah-ed. He opened another and there was a little butterfly. “Beautiful,” the girls all said, since it is very hard for 8-year old boys to say ‘beautiful.’ He opened another, and there was a rock. And as third graders will, some laughed, and said, “That’s crazy! How is a rock supposed to be like new life?” But the smart little boy whose egg they were speaking of spoke up. He said, “That’s mine. And it knew all of you would get flowers, and buds, and leaves, and butterflies, and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me, that’s new life.”

The teacher opened the next one, and there was nothing there. The other children, as 8-year olds will, said, “That’s not fair—that’s stupid!—somebody didn’t do it right.” About that time my teacher friend felt a tug on his shirt, and he looked down and Phillip was standing beside him. “It’s mine,” Philip said. “It’s mine.” And the children said, “You don’t ever do things right, Philip. There’s nothing there!” “I did so do it,” Philip said, “I did do it. It’s empty—the tomb is empty!”

The class was silent, a very full silence. And for you people who don’t believe in miracles, I want to tell you that one happened that day last spring. From that time on, it was different. Philip suddenly became a part of that group of eight-year old children. They took him in. He entered. He was set free from the tomb of his differentness.

Philip died last summer. His family had known since the time he was born that he wouldn’t live out a full life span. Many other things had been wrong with his tiny little body. And so, late last July, with an infection most children could have quickly shrugged off, Philip died. The mystery simply enveloped him completely. He was buried by that church. And at the funeral nine eight-year-old children marched right up to that altar—not with flowers to cover the stark reality of death. Nine eight-year olds, with their Sunday school teacher, marched right up to that altar, and lay on it an empty egg—an empty, old discarded holder of panty hose.”¹

¹¹ Quoted by Maxie Dunnam in *The Communicator’s Commentary: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon*, pages 296-298.

I know there are a lot of things wrong in life, a lot of things that hurt, that disappoint, a lot of pain and sadness and suffering and death. One day it all conspired against Jesus and they stuffed his dead body into a grave. It doesn't get worse than that. But it is right at that most desperate moment, right on that darkest day, that people of faith hold tightly to God, believing that God works all things together for good for those who love him. And when we open the grave...we find out a little boy named Philip understood the mystery of faith. It's empty. The tomb is empty. That empty tomb changed the life for a bund of eight-year old boys and girls. I hope and pray that empty tomb has changed your life. I know it has changed mine. It is because there is an empty tomb that people like you, and people like me can say with confidence, with conviction, with hope, and with joy, a simple phrase that affirms our trust in God.

God is good...all the time.

All the time...God is good.