

The Goodness of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 July 2014

Preacher: Philip Wells

[0 : 00] So we could ask this question, people do ask this question, is the God of the Bible good? So we could ask that in the way of saying what does he say about himself?

Does the God of the Bible say that he's a good God? And in what way, what does he mean by that? And then the question, would we call him good? Should we call him good?

What would we mean by that? Let me try and illustrate that point. I met somebody who went for a job in the teaching profession.

They left the private sector and they were going to go to a comprehensive school. And the person looking for the job was shown around the school by one of the pupils.

It's always a dangerous thing to set up for a prospective employee. And the prospective teacher was rather shrewd. And he'd said to the young man who was guiding him around the school, is this a good school?

[1 : 05] Now, I'm not actually telling you exactly what he said, but it was along these lines. And so this is imaginary now. And so the kid says, no. And the prospective teacher said, why not?

And the kid says, of course, they won't let you muck about in class. You have to be on time and you have to do your homework. So you see, the kid says, it's not a good school.

Now, to me, I think that's a great school. That is a good school if they do that. So it does depend where you're standing and what your standards are and what your own thoughts are as to whether you think something's good or not.

So as we think about God, we do need to think and listen carefully and even prayerfully so that we get the right end of the stick, which obviously the lad at that school didn't.

Does that make sense? Yeah. Okay. So let's do it in a few stages. So let me first of all tell you what I think are the motives for thinking about this.

[2 : 15] So the first motive is that we should give God suitable praise. Now, last time we looked at, if you remember, God's rule.

So we looked at the way God rules all things. And the Bible says God rules and we should praise him for that. But it does say it in a certain particular sort of way.

It does, you see, there is the possibility of a rule which is just power.

And that would be impressive. And you might even worship a God who was simply powerful. But I ask the question whether power alone, if that's all there is to God, whether that is a really worthy object of praise.

So let me give you a human illustration. Let me give you the illustration of an abusive husband. And he might well have power. And he might well have control over his poor wife.

[3 : 27] And she might well be in awe of him and obedience to him because of his power. But I don't think that that is a worthy relationship.

I don't think that just power guarantees praiseworthiness. So I'm anxious to make sure that what was said last week about God's rule is understood and put into a context.

So that we praise him with suitable praise, not only for his power, but as we shall see, for his goodness. So that's one motive.

A second motive is a defense against objections. Now it's a fairly commonly heard objection to say something like this.

How can a God who is good possibly allow evil and evil deeds and evil people and evil situations, how can he possibly allow them to exist or to achieve results or whatever?

[4 : 36] So that's a question that people ask. And it's really attacking the goodness of God.

It's saying, okay, you say there is this God, this Christian God, that he can't exist and be good in a world where there is evil and suffering.

So I'd like to say something as a defense against that objection. I don't think it's possible to say everything. And I don't think it's so simple and straightforward that I could give you five or six points and that would answer all the possible ways of coming to that.

But I can at least say this, that in considering God's goodness, we have not yet come to the end of the story. That's an important point.

We have not yet come to the end of the story. Things that are evil do happen. People that are evil do exist. They do seem to get away with things.

[5 : 49] They do seem to achieve their goals. And actually there are plenty of places in the Bible where that is commented on. But we have not come to the end of the story.

There is a day that all creation is waiting for. A day when all the unbalances of the books will be balanced up. The things that are evil that have apparently been got away with, they will get their comeuppance.

And the things that are good that are apparently forgotten will be rewarded. So just stopping off on that point for a moment, the objection that God is good, well, we'll see something about God's goodness, but we can also say it's too early to make our minds up yet because we haven't got to the end of the story.

And a third motive is for the reality of relationship with God. Now relationships with another person depend on our understanding their motives and their character and their actions and responding rightly to them.

So we might say to somebody, you have been good to me. So if there's somebody and we've rightly understood their character and their motive and their actions, we would say to them, thank you, you have been good to me.

[7 : 27] And then we might then think of our own reactions and say, but actually I haven't been good to you and I'm sorry.

Can we restore our relationship? And relationships work, among other things, by understanding goodness and the lack of goodness and so on.

And this is important for us in our relationship with God because unless we understand his goodness, we won't be grateful and we will misrepresent God.

We will not relate to him as we should. And unless we realise that by comparison, we have not been good to him, we won't be humbling, confessing our sin, which is what we should do if we're in right relationship with God.

So here are at least three motives for trying to get a grip of the goodness of God. Suitable praise, defence against objections and having a real, proper relationship with God day by day.

[8 : 39] Right, let's look now at, I'm still creeping up on this fairly slowly, but let's think about what we mean by good. What do we mean by good?

And if you stop to think about it, it's perhaps not such an easy question. So I've thought of three meanings. So we could think of moral, ethical good, moral good, as opposed to evil, moral good. So we would say, as distinct from, shall we say, cheating. Is cheating good? No. Cheating's bad, isn't it? It's wrong.

Stealing. So we understand the idea of possessions. The right to have a possession, and if you take somebody's possession without their agreement, it's stealing.

And we also understand the ideas of deception and lying. So if you tell somebody something, and it isn't true, that's not a good thing to do. So we've got moral goodness.

[9 : 51] So cheating, stealing, deceiving are not morally good, they are bad. And what could we say about God? Is he good in this sense?

In fact, there's a whole set of words to do with God, like just, and justice, and right, and righteous, and those all relate to God in that sense of moral goodness.

If you'd like to turn to Deuteronomy 32, verse 4, which we actually were singing a moment ago. Deuteronomy 32, verse 4, though the translation is slightly different here.

Deuteronomy 32, verse 4, says, He is the rock, His works are perfect, and all His ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright, and just, is He. So that would be a text which puts God firmly in the category of moral, ethical good, just, and so on.

[11 : 12] But I can go a little bit further than that, so I don't know even whether I spelt that right, but I didn't check it. aesthetically good, which is a very long word, so you can take that one with you, aesthetically good.

But I'll tell you what I mean. I mean good in the sense of, if you say, I went to see a movie and it was a good movie. You're not saying it was just, you're saying it was good in a sense of artistically good.

Or you could talk about good food. There's lots of programmes on the telly about good food, you know, rubbish food, good food. Good food.

Fantastic food. Good food. And you could talk about good music. Bad music, good music. Great music.

Okay, so this is not to do with a moral quality, is it, it's to do with artistic quality, aesthetic good. And of course, so I've put there, I think we mean something like pleasing, beautiful, wholesome.

[12:22] So we're not in the realm of morality or ethics, but we're in a slightly different realm. And of course, one of the first uses of the word good in the Bible is when God made everything and he said, and he saw that it was good.

Yeah. So, and he says that loads and loads of times. So, God knows about making things that are good in this artistic sense. So he doesn't just make good food, he makes a good planet with all sorts of good things on it.

And I wonder whether the Psalm 34 is a little bit along those lines when it says, taste and see that the Lord is good. good. So the tasting, you see, is a bit like food, isn't it?

Taste that the Lord is good. Mmm, yummy, good. And see that the Lord is good, which is a little bit like an artistic something, see the Lord is good, fantastic, brilliant, beautiful, wonderful.

So I think that that would be a fair use of the word good. And maybe you'd say, right, we've done it now, let's just get on a bit. But I've got you a third use of the word good, which is to will or to do good in a sense of benevolence.

[13:39] So think about this, it's when there's something, well, I've put here a good land. Actually, several times in the Bible, God gives the people a good land.

And I, it's not saying it's morally good, and I'm not saying, I don't think he's saying it's beautiful, I think he's saying it's productive. It's good land. You know, you've planted something, it will produce a lot of fruit.

It's sort of rich and, yeah, productive, enriching. A good person. So I think that when we have students, if a student helps with the washing up, they're a good student.

So it's not a moral thing and it's not an aesthetic thing, it's something about, I don't know, generosity, helpfulness, productiveness, enrichingness, kindness, and, of course, God is a God who gives, brings good news.

And I think that good news is not morally good, it's not aesthetically good, it's sort of good in this sense that it's enriching.

[15:11] It produces something good and wonderful and so the angel can say, as you remember, I bring you good news of great joy.

So that's, I think there's another sort of goodness in mind there. And what about this as a text?

Psalm 146, verse 7, doesn't use the word goodness, but does it not describe a God of whom you would say he is good?

Psalm 146, verse 7, 146, verse 7, where it says things like this, the God of Jacob upholds the cause of the oppressed, gives food to the hungry, sets prisoners free, gives sight to the blind, lifts up those who are bowed down, the Lord loves the righteous and watches over the alien, he sustains the fatherless and the widow.

It seems to me that we could use the word goodness there without stretching language. He's a God who's kind, he's a God who helps people, he's a God who goes out of his way to enrich and protect that God sustains the fatherless and the widow.

So I've given three meanings or three areas in which we could use the word good, so the moral quality of justice, the artistic quality of pleasing and wholesome, and this of doing good.

[16:45] So I've got those three general ideas, and I'd like us to think then about God as good in at least those areas, I think he's good in each of those areas and all of them, and then to think how does that all fit together?

together. And if we were to try and fit all the Bible teaching into a nutshell, which of those three would you put first?

Which of those three would you say this is basically the goodness of God? See, that's the task of theology really, to try and put it all together, and there are some pitfalls there, and there are some

surprises there, so that's what we're going to do next.

Okay, we've got the general idea of what we might mean by good. So let's look at some Bible texts, and you might be thinking in your mind, which of those possibilities will the texts emphasise?

Now, there are 14 texts that say the Lord is good, or words to that effect, so I won't go through all of them, but let's look at some of them. So the first one that says the Lord is good that I have got on my list is Psalm 25, verse 8.

[18:17] Psalm 25, verse 8. And you might like to think how you would finish the second part of this phrase.

verse 8. So, verse 8. First part, good and upright is the Lord. Okay, so it definitely uses the word good.

And then upright, which I think is yashar, which means morally correctly aligned. Good and upright is the Lord. Therefore, therefore, now that's the question, where would you go with the therefore? It's interesting to see where the psalmist goes. Therefore, he instructs sinners in his ways. I find that quite interesting because I could imagine that it would say good and upright is the Lord, therefore he rejects sinners.

But actually what it says is good and upright is the Lord, therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.

[19:29] It's interesting, that's the way the connection works, at least in that psalm. Let's try psalm 34 verse 8, which is what we've sung and alluded to already.

Psalm 34 verse 8. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Now where would you go from there?

Taste and see that the Lord is good. therefore be in awe of him all the world. I mean it does say that in some parts of the Bible. But here it says taste and see that the Lord is good.

Blessed is the one who takes refuge in him. That's an interesting connection isn't it? This is the goodness of the Lord. He's a God who's not pushing people away because of his goodness but a God who's opening his arms because of his goodness and says come to me come and snuggle up in my embrace blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.

That's the way that psalm takes the idea of God's goodness. What about this? Psalm 100 verse 5 which we've been singing.

[20:41] Psalm 100 verse 5 we're told to worship God not only because of his power but because of his goodness.

Psalm 100 verse 5 for the Lord is good and see where it goes with this now for the Lord is good and it could have said and his judgments are fearsome but what it does say for the Lord is good and his love endures forever his faithfulness to all generations.

I'm just interested in the way scripture connects up these ideas. The Lord's goodness links with the love that sticks to its promises and the faithfulness that keeps abiding to his promises.

That's what it does in Psalm 100 verse 5 and then Psalm 106 verse 1 is like Psalm 107 verse 1 and it's like Psalm 118 verse 1 and all of them say give thanks to the Lord for he is good and then what does it connect it with?

This is Psalm 106 verse 1 give thanks to the Lord for he is good. What do we do next? Well why do we do that? Because his love endures forever.

[22:19] That's quite interesting isn't it? That's the way the Psalm takes that his love endures forever and so does Psalm 107 and so does Psalm 118 and I'm sure you could probably find some counter examples but I've given you quite a few positive examples there that the goodness of God links actually to that third way of thinking of goodness of generosity and patience and mercy.

Well that's a little smattering of biblical texts let's let's do a couple more things I think might not be too long this morning that's always a rash thing to say isn't it let's put our noses in one big text which is Exodus 33 verse 18 and in this text Moses talks to God and God talks to Moses and the subject of God's goodness comes up and I think it's worth us looking at exactly how it does so this is Exodus 33 and I'm going to go to verse 18 in a moment but let me tell you what's happening this is the old covenant this is the covenant with Moses and the Ten Commandments and the Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone and that's the relationship that's what's being talked about that's the situation and we're talking about the Exodus and God's people going across the desert to the promised land and making that huge journey and in verse so there's Moses let's try and get Moses onto the screen so he's talking to God and he says in verse 12 you've been telling

me lead these people but you haven't let me know whom you will send with me so who who's going to come with me says Moses as he faces this huge new chapter in the story of the people of God and God answers in verse 14 my presence will go with you and I will give you rest interestingly reminiscent of something Jesus said but the Lord says my presence will go with you now what I need to say is that the word for presence or the word translating presence is the word face my face will go with you since they will have his face with them my presence will go with you and Moses says in verse 18 show me your glory so let me see something of who you really are I want to see who you really are and the Lord says I will show you my goodness verse 19 I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you so here's God himself telling us what his goodness is like so I'm all in favour of this because if you know I've done a bit of a Bible study I'm not 100% confident that I've understood everything and got it all in the right order but if God says I'll do that for you I'll tell you about my goodness in my own words then I'm I think that's what we should listen to so that's what it's doing here so in verse 19 the Lord says I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you I will proclaim my name the Lord in your presence I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion but he said you cannot see my face for no one may see me and live so God is saying

I'll show you my goodness in a sense but you won't yet see my actual face every detail because that's a lethal thing you can't see my face and live but I'll show you what you can manage I suppose what is it like it's like I don't know if you have a if you go and buy a pizza you go to an Italian restaurant and they make a pizza in a stone oven is that what they do they put it on a stone in an oven help me out on this pizza something like that fire oven yes dough stuff on the top of it put it on a thing that looks like a canoe paddle don't they in I'm making this up as I go along as you can tell out so the pizza's in there get really hot and then give it out put it in front of you but don't eat it yet because you'll burn your mouth you can't cope with a pizza fresh from the oven it'll burn you you have to give it a bit of time and space let it cool down only then can you eat it

[27 : 47] I think what God's saying is you can't have me fresh and direct because it'll burn you you have to have me in a sort of I don't know you see what I'm trying to say let's see what the text says verse 21 the Lord says there is a place near me where you may stand on a rock when my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft in the rock so a cleft is a sort of split and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by then I will remove my hand and you will see my back but my face must not be seen so God's saying you can't see my actual face because you just couldn't stand it but what you've asked to see me what I'll let you do is see what you can cope with which is my back get the idea of that you'll see my back so let's let's put Moses there a little bit complicated because I couldn't really draw a cleft in a rock but here he is there's a little ledge there's

Moses and he's hidden in that split in the rock and he's got his two tablets of the old covenant that's the rock two tablets of the old covenant so there he is and let's see what happens so this is in chapter 34 it's all to do with the tablets verse 4 Moses chiseled out two stone tablets he goes up on the mountain verse 8 the lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name the lord and he passed in front of Moses proclaiming okay this is God showing his glory okay this is God showing his goodness in the way that he chooses to do it so we are in chapter 34 verse 6 he passed in front of Moses proclaiming so this is God telling us about his goodness the lord the lord the compassionate and gracious god slow to anger isn't it interesting that's how

God says think of my goodness this way first thing I'm compassionate second thing I'm gracious third thing I'm slow to anger and I'll tell you some other things of my goodness I'm abounding in I'm full of love now the love that he speaks of here the Hebrew word is chesed and it means a particular sort of love it's a faithful love it's a count on me through thick and thin love it's if you're in a hole you can call on me any time day or night sort of love that's what chesed is and God is full of it he's abounding in chesed and faithfulness and that's emet and that means being firm and steady and dependable and reliable and you can count on me and I won't forget what I said it's that and that's why they go together so steadfast love and chesed and emet steadfast love and faithfulness God is full of full of those twin good things and he says I keep love to thousands now does it mean thousands of people or thousands of generations but whatever it is thousand is a big number he says this is this is my goodness this is how you're to think of my goodness and he says I forgive wickedness and rebellion and sin so the next thing he talks about is his forgiveness I forgive wickedness and rebellious and sin and then at the end is what I would have put right at the beginning because I did that on my list number one moral inflexibility and so but he mentions it at

the end of his exposition of his goodness he says but

I don't leave the guilty unpunished and what it says in the original is I don't exempt doesn't even use the word guilty and it doesn't use the word punished it just says I don't exempt I don't overlook I don't acquit I don't condone but he says and this is a perplexing one isn't it he says I punish the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation I visit the iniquity of the fathers upon their children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation and that's God saying that's my goodness so that's God's own words if you like that's the way God would put it so let's think about this for a little bit and I think it is surprising because there is certainly an emphasis on his goodness in the sense of his kindness isn't it do you agree with that it emphasizes his kindness his compassion and his grace if you think of the

[33 : 56] Old Testament you might think the Old Testament is full of judgment full of God punishing people and you think perhaps of the book of Kings 400 years of kings doing this and doing that and you think it's all to do with punishment but actually I think it's 400 years of patience the God of the Bible is patient with people he's patient with his own people generation by generation he didn't send them into exile straight away he put up with them for yonks before putting them into exile think of Adam and Eve he didn't although he said in the day you eat you will surely die God actually was really patient with them and so I draw from this that God is the same today I think that's hugely encouraging to us that our God is good and he says think of this goodness at least in this sense and perhaps even first in this sense I'm kind I'm kind to you guys because we test his patience don't we we need a compassionate gracious

God a God a grace meaning he doesn't treat us as our sins deserve slow to anger that's to do with patience so number one emphasis on kindness number two emphasis on faithfulness faithfulness to promises faithfulness to commitments this is this whole idea of being full of steadfast love and full of constancy and you know remember the thousand there is it thousands of people or thousands of generations but it's a lot and it says that God keeps his promises a lot he's full of that sort of thing he's full of steadfast love and every time we think oh dear I've blown it this time God won't hear my prayers today I've really messed things up this week God says well you've forgotten that I'm absolutely full of steadfast love and

I'm full of reliability so we have the same God today so I think that's a source of great encouragement! and I noticed thirdly in that text it's very specific about forgiveness and it says I forgive wickedness rebellion and sin and I don't want to try and pretend that this is watertight way of looking at it but those three words do have three different slight different shades of meaning and you could say wickedness is being twisted and you could say rebellion is when you cross boundaries that you shouldn't cross and sin is when you miss the mark of what you should be doing and whatever particular sin it is and I think it's meant to cover all sorts of sin God says I can forgive that and that's encouraging isn't it because Satan says to us well I can forgive all sorts of sins but I just can't forgive your sin

I can forgive all sorts of people but I can't forgive you and the Bible says God forgives all sorts of sins and he just forgives them and then just following the way the text he does say but I don't exempt or acquit or condone that's what it says I do not leave the guilty unpunished and this reminds us that sin does matter so we shouldn't read the first part of it and say ah well this shows us that God doesn't really care about sin at all what a relief and God says no forgiveness is forgiveness being slow to anger isn't the same thing as not caring there's a big difference between those two and here at the end it says sin does matter there is such a thing as punishment for sin sin not only matters but it affects other people did you notice that

I must confess I don't fully understand I'm sure I don't fully understand that part of the text the third and fourth generation but at least it does say sin affects other people that's true isn't it sadly it's true you think well that's rotten that's totally unfair and I think that's the way sin is it's rotten stuff it isn't fair it isn't nice it doesn't play according to the rules it affects other people and God says that's the way sin is and it can even affect people that we love it says the third and fourth generation your own family get involved it tells us that God is not soft on sin so here are four things that that text says about God's goodness and it leaves us thinking how do they fit together does it not leave us thinking that how can God be kind and faithful to his promises and forgive sins and still not be soft on sin and I'm tempted to say that the text doesn't give us an answer to that and I'm tempted to say that the whole

[39 : 33] Old Testament leaves us hanging wondering how that all works out I don't think I want to push it any further than that but I do want to take us to a place where we can see an answer and I want to go fast forward to thousands of years later and I want to go to another hill this time there's no it's on a rock and there's no split in a rock and on this hill there is another covenant mediator this time he's nailed to a cross and on this occasion God shows his justice because as it says in the Old Testament text he does not exempt people he does not acquit them and in this case the person on the cross is

God's own son and God does not exempt his own son God did not spare his own son and whereas Moses was hidden from the face of God this man is not hidden from the face of God Moses was spared death by being protected but this man is not protected he bears the full weight of the heat and the lethal force of God's reaction against sin and this the chemical makeup of this scene is not to do with rock like it was in Exodus but the chemicals that we think of in this case are watery blood flows from the side of this covenant mediator and water flows from the side of this covenant person and we're talking about the cross of

Jesus Christ and here we see how a just God can bring forgiveness because the punishment that was due to us falls on him instead and whereas we couldn't see the face of God and live God brings death to this man on the cross and from his side flows water and blood the blood sort of reminds us of forgiveness and the water sort of reminds us of streams of living water because from him flows the new life of the spirit and we don't see the goodness of God in its fullest form in

Exodus 34 we see the goodness of God in its fullest form on the cross of Calvary because there God proclaims his name and there God shows his glory and there God shows his goodness and he shows it through a man dying on the cross and if we want to see the goodness of God and what it really means that's where we can look we see God's moral perfection in its fullest form we see his justice in its most inflexible form he did not spare Jesus anything of the punishment but it wasn't due to him it was due to us and there we see the kindness of God in its fullest form but through Jesus Christ he shows compassion to sinners he shows mercy to sinners he forgives wickedness and iniquity and sin because

Christ died on the cross I think if we talk about the goodness of God that's where we should look and the goodness of God offers to sinners the goodness the goodness of God says where will you find shelter on the last day of judgment when all wrongs get their comeuppance where will you find shelter what will you do about the fact that God does not leave the guilty unpunished the cross invites sinners it says this is the one place in time and space and history where you as a sinner can taste and see that the Lord is good it's an invitation to people like us

[45 : 02] God has been so good to us but we've been so unkind to him and how is it received what do you have to do well the Bible says it's actually all been done for us and what we're to do is to receive that by faith which really is saying thank you Lord you've done it all for me we're close we're close by singing another song about the Lord being good we're going to sing 437 and this song says there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin there is a green hill far away outside the city wall where our dear Lord was crucified who died to save us all