

There's a little call and response phrase that Christians oftentimes will say to each other, that affirms the Biblical teaching that God is good. We've done this a few times before in church, and you can do the response part here:

God is Good (All the Time!)

All the Time (God is Good!)

Sometimes that phrase, or similar kinds of affirmations, get spoken as though we're on autopilot. To a person who questions God's goodness, it can sound like a mantra that hasn't really been thought through. Or like the person saying it hasn't ever experienced difficulties in life and maybe questioned God's goodness. So what about when God doesn't seem so good? Like when the job search continues to be fruitless? When we, or a loved one, suffers through cancer or a disease, or they die? When someone shoots up a school or a concert or a shopping mall? Or a hurricane strikes? Or when you thought you were doing something that God was calling you to do and you thought it was going to have certain outcomes...but after all your work: the end is far less than you expected? Or one of the most difficult crises our family could ever possibly face: when your kid says he wants to trade in his snow skis for a snowboard? (Fortunately, that hasn't actually happened, because I'd hate to have to tell them they would have to move out of the house. ☺)

But, in the more serious of those: **Is God still good in those kinds of situations? Does God have a plan for our lives, and is it good?** Maybe at some point in your life you've questioned whether God is good. Maybe you're questioning that even today. This is what we're looking at today as we continue our series titled, "Believe" that in a nutshell is about "What do I believe, and what difference does it make?" We're looking at 10 foundational beliefs of the Christian faith, why they matter, and what they mean for us. **Today's could be summarized with this statement of faith: "I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life."**

We began last week with a look at the foundational belief that God is real, Creator and Lord over *everything* and is the only God worth worshipping. Everything in the entire created universe had a beginning, and nothing in the

universe has caused itself to come into being. You and I, for example, did not decide to manifest ourselves. The stars and the planets did not just decide one day to come into existence. So where did it all come from? The answer is that it all came from an *uncreated* being who exists *beyond* time, with no beginning and no end: God. So that's where we started, and I would highly encourage you, if you missed last week's message, to go online and listen to it or read it, or pick up a copy in the lobby this morning, to begin with that same foundation that the rest of us started the series with.

But the next question is: **What is God like? Is He good, kind, and loving? Or is he angry and mean?** Is God still active in His creation, and does that include our lives, or is he withdrawn and not involved in any way? So I hope to help us wrestle with and answer some of these kinds of questions in today's message.

I think the first thing to figure out with this is what we mean by "good." Jesus ran into this problem (Mark 10:17-18 and parallel passages) with a guy who came up to Jesus, fell down on his knees before him, and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responds, "Why do you call me 'good?' No one is good except God alone." Jesus isn't saying that he's not God or good...in fact he says so elsewhere...The reason he answered it this way is that we need our understanding of "good" to be stretched and redefined. **Too often, we define "good" how we want. But God is good by virtue of who he is. He's good in an absolute sense.**

One time there was a wedding rehearsal, and the groom approached the pastor with an unusual offer. He said, "Look, I'll give you \$100 if you'll change the wedding vows. When you get to the part where I'm supposed to promise to 'love, honor and obey' and 'be faithful to her forever,' well, I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave that out." He passed the minister a \$100 bill and walked away satisfied.

On the day of the wedding, when it came time for the groom's vows, the pastor looked the young man in the eye and said: "Will you promise to prostrate yourself before her, obey her every command and wish, serve her breakfast in bed every morning of your life, and swear eternally before

Almighty God and your lovely wife and all these guests here today, that you will not ever even *look* at another woman, as long as you both shall live?" The groom gulped and looked around, and said in a tiny voice, "Yes," then leaned toward the pastor and hissed: "I thought we had a deal." The pastor slipped him back the \$100 bill the groom had given him and whispered: "She made me a better offer." You see: A "good deal" is relative. A kid can go sit on Santa's lap at the mall and be asked, "Were you good this year?" And she can answer, "I sure was. I only kicked my brother a few times." If you got an iPhone when it first came out in 2007, you probably thought it was really good. My guess is you wouldn't trade your current phone to have the old one back; the old one isn't as good.

You see, "good" can be a little slippery. When looking at ourselves, we say, "I think I'm good, because others are worse than me....I'm not as bad as *that* person." Or we think we're good because we can do things that will cause other people to say, "you're good!" So our understanding of "good" tends to be relative, and tends to be shaded by our own positive self-perception.

The Bible declares over and over again that God is good, and only God is good, in the absolute sense. Not only is He good, but He's involved in our lives. We see it in today's passage: "My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not let your foot slip." He watches over us...he "won't sleep or slumber." He will keep you from all harm, and "watch over you now and forever more." This is a passage about the goodness of God. There are many others, including Psalm 119:68, "You are good, and what you do is good; teach me your decrees;" "**Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever**" (Psalm 107:1). James 1:17, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." Romans 12:2, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will." 1 John 1:5, "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Over and over we see this kind of understanding of God in Scripture, that He is good.

But where do we actually see this goodness? Where do we see God's involvement in our lives and caring for us? It's one thing for the Bible to say it, and for many of us, we've wrestled with things enough that we trust what the Bible says. Our experience of God confirms what Scripture teaches us and so we're able to trust God's Word. But for some, that isn't enough. **So how can the writers of Scripture and Christians today declare that God is the very essence and definition of "good?"**

Here's what I see, and what I think Scripture says to us as well. Have you ever looked up at the night sky and seen all the stars out there? Not just when you're here in the city...but out in the middle of nowhere. You look up, and you see a night sky filled with stars...maybe a planet or two as well such as Mars or Venus or Jupiter. It's unbelievable. But it's also deceptive. Most of what you're seeing up there is nothingness in a very absolute sense: pure nothingness. And unbelievably cold: Just beyond the earth's atmosphere it's in the range of 250 degrees below zero (fahrenheit). Get further out into deep space, and it approaches 460 degrees below zero. And *that's* what most of the universe is – not the stars that light up the sky; 96% of the universe¹ is 460 degrees below zero of literally nothing. There is nothing inhabitable about the universe. There's no reason life should exist. And yet here we are, inhabiting the third rock from the sun. God is so, so good.

His goodness is seen in the fact that you and I exist and that earth is habitable. Most of the time we take that for granted. And what we often do is focus on the negatives, rather than the stunning amount of blessing around us – from the mountains in the distance to the beauty of the flowers in the gardens to the good gifts of love and laughter and community to the music we've sung even this morning, to the smell of coffee...the taste of chocolate or vanilla and sugar that masks the terrible taste of coffee. ☺ We take that stuff for granted.

You see, after God created everything, God called it all "very good." Creation is an extension of God. **And if creation is very good, then just how good is God?**

And yet, we focus on the shadows so often. Why are they there? Why do bad

things happen, and does it mean that God in fact isn't good? I think there are three categories of the pain and difficulties we experience in life. **The first is that they are the results of humans making really dumb decisions.** Let's be honest: dumb decisions by people are the cause for a lot of the pain we experience. Over the last 17 years, the Mariners are a great example. Lots of dumb decisions, lots of pain. Or how about a potential employer who chooses to hire someone else. These aren't sinful things...but they still cause pain.

In 2006 I interviewed with a very large church in the Portland area to be their youth pastor. They chose someone else, and I finished second. That was really painful, in large part because I already knew the head pastor before the whole interview process, and he had encouraged me to apply for the position. And when he called me at the end of the interview process to let me know they'd gone with someone else, I told him that I was surprised and that I thought they'd made a dumb decision. Well, I didn't use that phrase. I said I thought they made a mistake. But that was painful for them to go in a different direction. A little less than a year later he called again to tell me that the person they'd chosen didn't work out, they had to let him go, and he wanted to know if I'd still be interested. Now they were the ones experiencing the pain of their decision. I wasn't able to, because I'd taken a new pastorate. But dumb choices we, and others, make oftentimes lead to a lot of pain.

Secondly, sin causes a lot of pain. The question is often asked: Why is there sin if God is good? Free will is certainly a big part of that – God loves enough not to make us robots, and in our free will we oftentimes sin. I had a professor in seminary who liked to use the analogy of turning a light on in a room that helps us to think about all of this. If the light is on and there's nothing in the room, then there aren't any shadows. But as soon as you put something in the room – a chair or a table, for example – then shadows are created.

Creation is God "putting stuff in the room," we might say, and God is the light. Out of God's goodness, he's given Creation, and He's given us boundaries to live by. But bound up in that are shadows, and we stumble into the shadows with our sin quite regularly. The Apostle Paul addresses all of

this in the 7th chapter of Romans, where he writes, **“The law code started out as an excellent piece of work. What happened, though, was that sin found a way to pervert the command into a temptation, making a piece of “forbidden fruit” out of it. The law code, instead of being used to guide me, was used to seduce me. Without all the paraphernalia of the law code, sin looked pretty dull and lifeless, and I went along without paying much attention to it.**

But once sin got its hands on the law code and decked itself out in all that finery, I was fooled, and fell for it. The very command that was supposed to guide me into life was cleverly used to trip me up, throwing me headlong. So sin was plenty alive, and I was stone dead. But the law code itself is God’s good and common sense, each command sane and holy counsel.

I can already hear your next question: “Does that mean I can’t even trust what is good [that is, the law]? Is good just as dangerous as evil?” No again! Sin simply did what sin is so famous for doing: using the good as a cover to tempt me to do what would finally destroy me. By hiding within God’s good commandment, sin did far more mischief than it could ever have accomplished on its own” (Romans 7:8-13, *The Message translation*). Essentially, he’s saying that there’s a moral code, a “law code”, that God calls us to live by (Ten Commandments for starters), but there’s also a shadow side of that, and sometimes we stumble into that. We’re tempted, and we fall for it. And as the saying goes: “I can resist anything but temptation.” A lot of sinful stuff is pretty tempting, but in the end it isn’t good for us, and it isn’t definitive of God’s goodness, either.

Lastly, sometimes the difficult stuff is God leading us through something to shape us and refine us and even with the intention of causing us to lean on God more. You can call it discipline, or tough love...but it’s a facet of God’s goodness. This is especially where we need to have a fuller understanding of the word “good” and realize that “good” doesn’t always mean “what I want” or “what’s easy.” But it’s also where we need a fuller understanding of the word “bad.” Sometimes what we perceive to be “bad” is actually exactly what we need, and in the end is good, even if it is painful.

We parents (anyone who's been around kids much) have to wear this hat with our own children all the time, or else they grow up thinking the world revolves around them. For instance, Gwen and I have a policy that our kids don't sleep with their phones in their room. They don't like the policy, but it's what we do. I have never read anything on parenting that says it's good for kids to have their phones in the room when they sleep. It's just too tempting to stay up checking social media, playing games, etc. Our kids probably think we're evil for it. Does that mean mom and dad aren't good, or that we don't love them or want what's best for them? Of course not. In fact, it's *because* of our love and wanting what's best for them that we do it. Sometimes, God works the same way.

And even the other couple of things – our sin and the dumb choices we make – those things, even if not intentionally brought about by God, He still will use to teach us and draw us to Him. Talk about a Good God! He takes our dumb choices and our sin and rather than abandoning us because of them, uses them to refine us and draw us to Him.

Just this week I learned a great lesson that ties into this. I was working on a deck that I'm building onto our house. I was listening to some music as I worked, and a song from one of my favorite bands played that has a chorus line that says, "Sometimes I feel like there's an angel watching over me." Literally as I was listening to those words I stepped on a piece of wood that had a nail in it, sticking straight up into the air. I didn't even realize it until I picked my foot up and the piece of wood came up attached to my shoe. The nail had gone in just enough on the inner part of the sole, that it went into the rubber, but missed the instep of my foot, even though the nail was more than an inch long and went that far in. I felt like God, or an angel, was watching over me, and I thought it was unbelievably providential that this happened at the exact moment that song and that line was playing.

A couple nights later I stepped down off of my deck framework onto the ground – which is about an 18-inch step so I landed with a lot of force – and when my foot hit the ground, I stepped onto another piece of wood with a nail sticking up. This one went right into my big toe on my left foot, though

fortunately not in the center. But it definitely got my toe. The lesson I learned? Throw away pieces of wood that have nails in them! (Someone said after the first service: Get rid of the garbage in our lives, so it gives Satan less stuff to poke us with!) The other lesson: **God is good, and He is watching over me, but that doesn't mean I can just go through life with my brain turned off and not paying attention to Him, or to my own actions.** God is good.

He's good when I miss the nail by a fraction of an inch, and He's good when the nail spears my toe. He's good when the doctor says "you're all better, and when he says it's cancer. He's good when we eat healthy and when we choose to stay in our alcoholism. He's good when we don't love our friends and family well. He's good when they don't love us well. He's good when we don't love Him well. He's good when we're faithful to our spouse, and He's good when we have an affair. He's good when we get the job we want, and when we don't get the one we want. He was good when Jesus was born. He was still good when Jesus died on the cross. And He was good when Jesus rose from the tomb. And He's good everywhere in between - in your life and in my life.

And He's got good plans for you and for me. He knows those plans. Jeremiah 29:11 says, **"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11).** That is a good God. And even when things are difficult, God is still good. His plans for you are good. He's our Heavenly Father, our good father, who out of his goodness has given us life in an otherwise uninhabitable universe. "He watches over you...he will watch over your life...your coming and your going both now and forever more" (Psalm 121 selections). And He loves us, He cares for us, and through Jesus He works for our good into eternity. He is absolutely good.

If you're so inclined to join with me in this statement of faith, I would invite you to finish out this message with me with these words: **"I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life, because He is good."** Let's Pray...Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.space.com/11642-dark-matter-dark-energy-4-percent-universe-panek.html>