

The Amazing Goodness of God

What's the best way to convince someone that God exists? And how do you get those who have no interest in God to listen when you talk about Him? In his book, God: A Biography, Steven Mosley shares a risky experiment he conducted while leading evangelistic meetings in Osaka, Japan. Mosley wanted to find some way to impress his listeners with the fact that God is real and He cares about them. Most of them had no previous experience with Christianity and were used to thinking of God as an impersonal force that controls nature, rather than a personal Savior who cares about each one of us. How would he overcome this misconception and convince them of God's great love? He explains:

"The fact that God is known through His actions had been weighing on me. I figured, if God acted for sinful Israel in the Old Testament and skeptical Greeks in the New Testament, why wouldn't He act for these modern unbelievers who were at least looking His way, even if they didn't see much? So I proclaimed that this week of meetings would be one big experiment. Gathering each night in small groups, the group leaders encouraged their members to identify specific needs in their lives. They then challenged them to discover through prayer what God would do about it, helping each one find a relevant promise in the Scriptures. These promises were not meant to be magic formulas, but simply a means for the leader to show his members what kind of prayers God answers. Finally, we explained our belief that we can approach God through Jesus Christ and we showed each one how to pray in His name."

"At the end of the week, I asked the leaders for their results. What I found surprised even me! Every person who followed through on the experiment received a definite answer. One young man had been sick and was worried about falling behind on the job. After praying about it, he found that a girl he'd previously misjudged as being selfish had done his work for him. A woman shared her desire to see her mother's grave in America. She received an unexpected invitation to visit her daughter in the U.S. A businessman who wanted a red tie even prayed for that. If I'd been his group leader, I would have suggested something more spiritual. Here we are trying to reveal God Almighty and this guy wants a red tie! But I wasn't there to administer my wisdom. So the man conducted his experiment and was pleasantly taken back when a salesman walked right into his office and sold him a red silk tie."

What was Mosley's conclusion based on his experiment? He writes, "None of these 'answers' was overwhelming. None would have forced a committed atheist to make room for the supernatural. But what a gracious touch they proved for each person asking! The petitioners perceived subtle nudges, notes written back with a hint of affection saying, 'Here I am, over here!'"

More important, what do you think about all this? Do you think it was safe, and would you dare to lead people to Christ by pointing them to His goodness? If you're still in

doubt, consider what Romans 2:4 says: “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, tolerance, and patience, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” In other words, after everything is said and done, it is God’s goodness, not intellectual arguments, that attracts people to Jesus Christ. The reason Paul wrote what he did in the book of Romans may have been due to his experience preaching to the idolatrous people of Lystra. Although they were not worshipers of the God of the Bible, he was able to grab their attention by reminding them: “God has not left Himself without testimony; He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; He provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.” (Acts 14:17)

Or consider Psalm 116:1, one of the passages I’d like to focus on in this message. Notice the Psalmist’s reason for loving God: “I love the LORD because He has heard my voice and my supplications, because He has inclined His ear to me. Therefore, I will call upon Him as long as I live.” The reason the Psalmist loves God is because God in His goodness has answered His prayers! So how can we hesitate to point people to God’s goodness? Instead of being risky, I believe it’s the very best way of proving His existence to them, because whether we realize it or not, God has been good to us every day of our lives, and not only to us, but to all the children of men. He has faithfully given us our daily bread and provided us with everything else we need for life and happiness.

That’s what I want to focus on as I continue our study of God. So far, we’ve considered His holiness and the fact that He never changes. But in this message I’d like to highlight the one attribute that just naturally draws people to Christ, and that’s His goodness. For that reason, I hope you’ll not only take time to reflect on these thoughts, but to take them home with you and share them with someone who is still trying to make up his or her mind about following Christ.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY THAT “GOD IS GOOD?”

Words are funny things. They take on different meanings depending on how we use them. The word “good” is like that. Think of the many ways we use it. We use it to describe welcome news, an obedient child, a businessman with integrity, the healthy type of cholesterol, as well as a successful day of fishing. So what do we mean when we say that God is good? None of these things! When we talk about God’s goodness, we’re referring not so much to His righteousness and purity, but to how kind and generous He is. In a moment we’ll look at how He demonstrates this. But first let me emphasize three facts about His goodness:

Fact #1: It is unbiased. You and I tend to favor people who are successful. For this reason, James warned, “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say

to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?" (James 2:1-4) Our evil thoughts are hopes that the successful person can benefit us in a way the poor person cannot. Praise God He never thinks like that! In talking about race relations, we may say that a person is "color blind" meaning that the color of someone's skin makes no difference to him. Be they red or yellow, black or white, he treats them fairly. Something like that can be said about God. His goodness is not aimed at those who can benefit Him in some way, for what can we give to God that He hasn't first given to us? Instead, He showers His goodness upon us all, no matter what we're like.

For example, in Matthew 5:43, Jesus tells us how to respond to those who hurt us: "You have heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Don't even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." The mark of a "complete" person (That's what "perfect" means here—not flawless performance, but the choice to love unconditionally) is the ability to be kind to those who hurt you and do good to those who have done you wrong. For that is the story of God's love in a nutshell. His goodness is indiscriminating and—

Fact #2: It is undeserved. Romans 5:6 says, "At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In other words, where can we look to get a perfect picture of God's goodness? To Jesus! For in Him God's goodness finds its perfect expression. His death reminds us that God's goodness never violates His justice. Sin must always be dealt with, for He is a holy God who cannot tolerate the smallest sin. And yet, His goodness reminds us that as wicked and as ungrateful as we are at times, He doesn't want us to suffer for it. So He sent His only Son to die in our place.

Sir Edward Burne-Jones, the 19th century English artist, stopped for tea one day at his daughter's home. As a special treat, his granddaughter was allowed to join them at the table. Unfortunately, she misbehaved and was made to stand in a corner with her face to the wall. A wise grandfather, Sir Edward knew better than to interfere with his granddaughter's discipline. So the next morning he returned to his daughter's home with paints and palette in hand. Going to the corner where the little girl was made to stand, he proceeded to decorate it with beautiful pictures—a kitten chasing its tail, lambs in a field, goldfish swimming. His wisdom kept him from interfering in his granddaughter's training, but his love drove him to do whatever he could to reduce her suffering.

God's goodness is like that. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death," but then it quickly adds, "The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans

6:23) You and I deserve whatever we get when we sin. And because everyone sins, each one of us will one day die. But not forever! God's goodness is so great that instead of leaving us to perish in our sins, He gave us a Savior to suffer in our place. For His goodness is undeserved, unbiased, and—

Fact #3: It is unending. While serving as a missionary in Romania, I was confronted by beggars on a daily basis. Usually I responded with compassion, not always giving them money, lest they spend it on alcohol, but at least with a gift of food. I say usually because there were days when I got up on the wrong side of the bed or had nothing with me to give them. On those days, I'm ashamed to say, I wasn't very patient. I'd say, "Quit pestering me. I gave you something yesterday, and I don't have time to deal with you today." Aren't you glad God isn't like that? Because He's infinitely wealthy, there's no end to His goodness. Paul assures us of this in Philippians 4:19, "My God shall supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus." And because His mood never fluctuates, He's as happy to meet our needs today as He was yesterday, and the compassion He'll feel for us after 10,000 years will be as strong as it is today. For "every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow." (James 1:17) In the words of the Christian songwriter:

***"Praise the Lord, He never changes. I come to Him, He's always there.
He comforts me on every level, takes the burdens that I bear.
Praise the Lord, He never changes. He's never any other way.
And He'll be the same tomorrow as He was and is today."***

HOW HAS GOD PROVEN HIS GOODNESS TO US?

If you had to teach a lesson on the goodness of God, where would you turn? The classic passage is Psalm 107 where the Psalmist lists 4 ways that men have "cried out to the LORD in their trouble" and been delivered from their distress. In fact, he repeats that phrase 4 times in this passage, each time emphasizing a different proof of God's goodness. The other phrase he repeats for emphasis is the praise chorus found in verses 8, 15, 21, and 31: "O, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!" Let's look at four ways God has proven His goodness to us:

Evidence #1: Gift of Home. Verse 4 recalls: "Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress." This takes us back to Israel wandering in the wilderness, feeding on bread from heaven, and waiting for God to lead them into the Promised Land and give them a permanent home.

Who can't identify with that stress in our current economy? Property taxes at record highs, homes worth less than our mortgages, hundreds of thousands out of work and unsure where their next rent check is coming from! It's easy to take the gift of home for granted until our health fails, our life savings are devoured, and we can't make our house payment. Then it becomes clear what a gracious gift a home is. Imagine what it would be like to be homeless! That's hard for most of us to do because very few of us have ever been without a roof over our heads. But why is that? Is there something intrinsically better about us than those who have nothing? No. The reason we enjoy the homes we do is because of God's "goodness and His wonderful works to the children of men."

Evidence #2: Gift of Redemption. Verse 10 continues, "Some sat in darkness and the desert gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So He subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress." Here the Psalmist describes Israel's exile in Babylon because of their sins and God's faithfulness in bringing them home. 1 Corinthians 10:11 says this happened as a lesson to us. The lesson is: If God could deliver Israel from their captivity in Babylon, shouldn't we be able to trust Him to save us from our sins and addictions today? Certainly, He can! The testimony of millions of believers is that Jesus Christ has all the power necessary to redeem us and more.

As a reminder of how good and powerful He is, think back to where you were 1, 10, or 50 years ago when you first met Christ. You were lost. You were hopeless. You had no idea why you were here or where you were going. Your life had very little meaning. Then you met Jesus and suddenly you had a new power, a new purpose, and a new direction. So the question is: Having given you new life and forgiven all your sins, will you continue in that direction? Will you live out in the power of the Spirit the new purpose for which you've been redeemed?

Many Christians are like the Standard Oil Float that was entered in the Rose Parade several years ago. The float was magnificent, decorated with thousands of American Beauty Roses. Then, right in the middle of the parade, something embarrassing happened. The float ran out of gas and had to be towed. How the crowd began to hoot with laughter! After all, if any float should have had enough gas, it should have been Standard Oil! But so often that's the way it is with us. We work hard to make a good impression on others, but on the inside there's a tragic lack of power. Why? Because rather than getting our power from our times with Him in prayer and other means of grace He gives us (worship, fellowship, study, etc.), we occupy ourselves with other pastimes and projects that bestow no grace on us at all. To enjoy the redemptive power of God, we need to remember where it comes from. It comes as a result of our daily fellowship with our Great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. "O, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness and His wonderful works to the children of men."

Evidence #3: Gift of Healing. Verse 17 describes another gift of God's grace: "Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He saved them from their distress. He sent forth His word and healed them; He rescued them from the grave." Some Christians insist that the age of healing has passed and that God no longer answers our prayers for supernatural healing. They watch the antics of faith healers on television and conclude: "This guy's a phony!" I agree. Many faith healers are charlatans. And yet, the fact remains, if God is not in the business of healing, then none of us would ever get well!

Sometimes God heals supernaturally, as He did in the case of our daughter. I took her to the urologist just before her fourth birthday to find out why she was using the bathroom every 15 minutes. "She has a large inoperable tumor in her abdomen," he said, and my life suddenly stopped. We took her in for the biopsy, and he was right. The grapefruit-sized tumor was malignant. But we and many others prayed. We took her to a specialist who operated on her, and when he met us in the waiting room afterward, he was amazed. All but the center of the tumor had turned benign and instead of taking 7 hours of surgery as he planned, it took 2 hours! Nor did he do anything to heal her! When he opened her up, he found that God had already done the healing. All the surgeon did was lift the self-contained tumor out of her body, and Heidi has been cancer-free ever since!

Other times God heals providentially through doctors and medicine. Some time ago, a friend's baby fell out of a window to the glory of God. Why was it to God's glory? Because little Juliana had the same type of tumor as our daughter, but in her case it wasn't benign, and doctors would not have known to remove it if she hadn't fallen out of the window and needed X-rays. So whatever disease you or your loved ones is suffering, trust God and thank Him that He is still in the healing business. Thank Him for the gift of home. Thank Him for the gift of redemption. Thank Him for the gift of healing. Finally, thank Him for the—

Evidence #4: Gift of Protection. Verse 23 says: "Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the LORD, and His wonderful deeds in the deep. For He spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted to the heavens and went down to the depths...then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distress." The writer is describing the danger of the high seas because in his day that was the primary means of long-distance travel. Today that has changed. Today we're more apt to take a plane, a train, or the riskiest of all forms of travel—the automobile! Did you know that more Americans die in car accidents each year than were killed in the Vietnam War? And yet, God has been good to us, hasn't He? Just think of all the close calls you've had and how many times the Lord has spared your life. Some of us, in our pre-Christian days, used to drink and drive, putting both ourselves and others at risk.

But you don't have to be irresponsible to face this danger. I remember taking our junior and senior high students on a snow retreat to Mount Rainer National Park. I was driving the truck carrying all our gear when I suddenly hit a patch of black ice and began sliding down the highway at 55 mph. The only thing that kept us from flipping over in the ditch was one lone rock by the side of the road. All the way up and down the highway, the shoulder was bare except that one spot where we slid off the road. Maybe you've had a similar experience. If so, take a moment before you finish this study to look back and thank God not only for your home, your health, and your redemption, but for the many times He has protected you from a premature death. John Newton was right!

*“Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come.
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”*

HOW ARE WE TO RESPOND TO GOD'S GOODNESS?

That's the question I want to ask before I finish this study: How do we respond to Someone who is so gracious and kind? The best answer is given in Psalm 116:12-17, where the Psalmist describes three ways we ought to respond to God's goodness—

Response #1: Salvation. First, he asks: “How can I repay the LORD for all His goodness to me?” The answer is then given. “I will take the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.” Think about it like this. If you sacrificed your child, so that another child might live, what would you expect in return? I would expect that child to receive the gift of life with gratitude, wouldn't you? So it is with our Heavenly Father! The Bible says He gave His very own Son to die for our sins. Therefore, what He now expects of every person in every place, no matter what else they accomplish in life, is to accept His Son as their Savior. “For how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” Hebrews warns. The greatest need of every sinner, then, which is what we all are, is the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ. But that isn't hard to find. The Bible promises, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved!” (Rom. 10:13)

Response #2: Appreciation. But the Psalmist doesn't stop there. Verse 17 adds: “I will sacrifice a thank offering to you and call on the name of the LORD.” In other words, we're to have an attitude of gratitude in light of all that Christ has done for us. The story is told of an army captain who was shot during World War II while dragging a friend to safety. Sadly, only the friend survived. The captain was killed. Hearing about their son's bravery, his parents invited his friend to dinner one night. They wanted to meet the man their son died to save. The man accepted the invitation, but arrived late, was drunk, and showed the worst manners possible—gobbling down his food, belching at the table, and never even mentioning their son. Afterwards, the mother burst into tears. “O why, O why, did our son have to die for such an ungrateful person!”

Let's accept the gift of salvation and thank God continually for the grace He's shown us. Finally, verse 19 describes the third way we should respond—

Response # 3: Dedication. He concludes, "I will fulfill my vows to the LORD in the presence of all His people, in the courts of the house of the LORD—in your midst, O Jerusalem." It may interest you to know that the Hebrews had no word for private thanksgiving. They knew that in order for it to be real, praise had to be expressed publically and involve the dedication of the person to God.

Let me ask you. Have you taken that step of commitment? Have you, by a conscious act of faith, received the Lord Jesus as your Savior, and in heartfelt thanks for all that He's done for you, have you expressed your praise in a public way, letting others know of your love for Him? The Bible says the first way we ought to do that is by being baptized as followers of Jesus. If you haven't yet taken that step of obedience, I encourage you to find a Bible believing church where you can be baptized and let others know of your love for Christ. But don't stop there. Make it your habit in life to regularly testify to His goodness, not only in the congregation of believers, but also to those who don't know Him yet and need to hear from you how good God is to those who follow His Son.

My wife doesn't know I'm writing this, so I feel free to brag about her a bit. Cheryl is the most winsome children's worker I've ever known. Wherever she goes, children follow. That's been true of churches where we have served. In one church, there was no children's music program. So she started one, and within a few weeks she had 60 young people singing to the glory of God. In Romania it was the same. We attended a village church near our home and noticed that they had no children's ministry. So she started one, and within a month we had 100 children coming, learning about Jesus, and calling on Him for salvation. It was also true in our home. Cheryl ran a daycare for years, and of all the people who interviewed her as a potential caregiver for their child, I can't remember even one who decided "No." Why are children drawn to my wife? Because she is good to them! In fact, in many cases, she treated them with more love and kindness than their own parents. So why wouldn't they love her in return!

I share that to remind you that what's true of Cheryl is infinitely truer of Jesus. The reason people are drawn to Him is because He's good to them. The Psalmist concludes, "I love the LORD because He heard my cry for mercy. Therefore I will take the cup of salvation, offer Him a thank offering, and fulfill my vows in the presence of all His people." What about you? Has God been good to you? Then let someone know it today. "O, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness and for His wonderful works to the children of men!"