

God Is Good (Genesis 50:20)

God Is Good . . . Just Not to Me.

“I know God is good. I just don’t think he’s good *to me*.”

Maybe you’ve heard people say this, or something similar. Maybe you yourself have said or thought it. The feeling is understandable. On the one hand, no one wants to deny what Scripture clearly teaches: “O give thanks unto the Lord; *for he is good!*” On the other hand, however, we experience things that are clearly *not* good: a chronic illness, the death of a loved one, or a crushing disappointment. Is it possible for someone who goes through intense, even devastating, trials to say sincerely, “God is good *to me*”?

Tasting and Trusting

When the Bible speaks of God’s goodness, it is not just delivering information we must memorize. Rather, it is inviting us into a relationship with a *Person* who may be experienced. For example:

“Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good!

Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” Psalm 34:8

“Oh, taste and see,” the psalmist sings, “that the Lord is good!” To taste something like sweet honey means to have a direct, personal experience of that sweetness. When it touches your tongue, you say, “I know that honey is sweet.” But you also say, “And it’s sweet *to me*,” because you are tasting it. The next phrase helps us understand what this means with respect to God: “Blessed is the man who takes refuge in [or, *trusts*] him!” This line of poetry puts tasting parallel to trusting, indicating that tasting is to honey (for example), as trusting is to God.

God Meant It for Good

To experience the sweetness of God’s goodness, then, means to trust him. But let us see how this works practically in the life of someone who went through extreme difficulties and still knew God to be good to him.

Joseph, the son of Jacob, is well-known for the way he was mistreated by his brothers. Driven by jealousy, they wanted to kill him but instead sold him into slavery where he spent the rest of his adolescence and young adulthood in prison. Through a series of events, Joseph eventually became second in command of all Egypt. With this authority, he instituted an ingenious program of agricultural conservation, saving Egypt and surrounding territories from starvation—including his own brothers who had mistreated him. In a tender moment, when his brothers were afraid that Joseph would take his revenge on them, he assured them:

“Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.” Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Genesis 50:19-21

Joseph’s statement teaches us three truths known by people who “taste and see” (i.e., “trust”) that God is good. They know: (1) something about evil, (2) something about God’s plan, and (3) something about God’s power to bring about that plan.

1. Those who trust that God is good know that **evil is real.**

When Joseph said to his brothers, “You meant evil against me,” he spoke both of the *intensity* of evil and of the *intention* of his brothers in carrying it out. Through his brothers’ actions, Joseph had spent some of his best years in slavery, prison, and isolation from his family. And when Joseph spoke to his brothers about this, he did not say, “Surely you didn’t realize how much pain you would cause me.” He did not sugarcoat the evil or minimize their intentions. Rather, he said plainly: “You *meant* it for evil.”

Joseph’s honesty about the badness of his situation teaches us an important lesson: We will never learn to see how good God is unless we are willing to admit how deep the hurt is. Living in denial about our pain and suffering is not the way to healing, nor will it lead to a proper view of God’s goodness. God’s goodness, in fact, *requires* us to see the badness of pain and suffering. If this universe were merely the product of blind, impersonal forces, we might say, “This hurts!” but we cannot say, “This hurts, and that’s not right!” On the other hand, when we see that this universe is the creation of a good God, we are *free* to declare the badness of evil. We are free to say “This hurts, and this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be!”

We are often afraid to admit this to ourselves and others. Perhaps we think that if we do, we will not be able to handle our own rage or despair. Trusting that God is good, however, means knowing something else . . .

2. Those who trust that God is good know that **God intends this evil to work out for good.**

Joseph said, “But God meant it for good.” The word “meant” is often translated “devise,” with the idea of developing a strategy. But it is also used to refer to the skill of textile artists fashioning beautiful fabric patterns. For example, in Exodus 36:8, Moses describes the making of the tabernacle curtains: “All those who were skilled among the workers made the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim woven into them by expert hands” (NIV). The words “woven . . . by expert hands” translates the Hebrew word rendered as “meant” in Genesis 50:20 (ESV). This helps us visualize the idea. Although forces of humans and nature seek to weave an evil pattern into the fabric of reality, God is the “Overweaver.” Against the intentions of evil, he weaves these very strands into the fabric to bring about a beautiful pattern.

But what is this “beautiful pattern?” For Joseph, it was the saving of many people from starvation. But this good—as good as it is!—was itself just one part of the picture. By rescuing the descendants of Jacob from starvation, God was carrying out an even bigger plan: the birth of an ultimate descendant of Jacob—one who would save people from final destruction—Jesus the Christ. The highest good for any human being is to dwell in the presence of God, which is possible only if they are conformed to the image of his Son. This is the “good” spoken of in Romans 8:28-29. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” God’s good plan for us is to be like Jesus so that we can enjoy the presence of God.

3. Those who trust that God is good know that **God has the power to bring about this good plan.**

For Joseph, God’s power to bring about this good plan was proven by his using a great evil—Joseph’s mistreatment—as a way many people would be saved from starvation. But that proof, great as it was, pointed to something beyond it. The most intense evil—God’s Son treated as a criminal and dying on a Roman cross—turned out to be the way God would save people from their sin (see Acts 2:23-24).

In this life, we may never be able to trace all the lines between our pain and God’s purposes. But the way we may “taste and see that God is good” is by taking refuge in Jesus, the One who suffered evil to bring about God’s good plan for us.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why is it understandable for a person to say, “God is good, just not to me?” What kind of circumstances lead someone to say or think this?
2. Why is a recognition of the badness of evil important to understanding the goodness of God? What kinds of evil are we afraid to fully admit, and why are we afraid to admit these?
3. How does grieving and sorrowing fit with still trusting that God is good?
4. What does the cross of Christ teach us about the goodness of God?
5. How might you encourage someone to trust in the goodness of God who is going through suffering you yourself are not experiencing?