

The Attributes of God Series: The Goodness of God

Exodus 33:12-23

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[Pray]

“If you hurt her, I’ll kill you” These are the first words I heard from my soon to be father in law. They were words I took to heart, especially because they were said while their 230 pound speaker held me by the scruff of the neck up against the wall.

Not being all that big of a guy myself I have always kept a keen eye out for giants – Giants being anyone over six feet tall and heavier than me... let me tell you there are a lot of giants out there! Size is an interesting thing, it is neither a positive or negative by itself, but it carries a great potential for either good or evil. Large people with a mean streak can be major forces of intimidation and terror, while gentle giants still having enormous strength, bring great comfort to those around them.

It would be a few years before I would cast my vote one way or the other as far as my father-in-law was concerned, until then I played it *real* safe.

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Please open your Bibles to Exodus chapter 33 – page 64 in your pew Bibles. This morning we are continuing our series examining the attributes of God.

And this morning we are looking at the goodness of God – a quality that connects itself to all God’s other attributes and brings peace and hope to repentant sinners – God’s goodness qualifies Him as the Ultimate Gentle Giant.

Last week we looked at Deuteronomy 7 and a sermon Moses preached to Israel just before they entered the Promised Land. Today’s text comes about 40 years earlier; with Moses up on Mount Sinai speaking with God at the same place he received the 10 commandments.

[Read Ex 33:12-23]

1.) “Goodness”. Good is both a simple and yet profound word. It is one of the 10 words my one year old daughter can say, and at the same time it is one of the primary attributes of God. How could something so simple describe God?

The short answer is that “good” means several different things.

First, and most basically, it is used qualitatively to talk about how well something is made. ...As we approach our annual church picnic my thoughts immediately run to all the incredible things to eat that show up when you get a bunch of German Baptist women together. Amen? In reference to this kind of a gathering my grandpa used to say “dem are **good** eats”. Meaning of course that the quality of cookery is superior.

Second, “good” is used to talk about character and the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. Proverbs 12:2 says “A **good** man will obtain favor from the Lord, but He will condemn a man who devises evil.” So good is the opposite of evil.

And it is here that Elliana has some concept of the word. Every morning at our house as soon as she wakes up she leads us through a ritual. She walks from room to room pointing at things like the tissue paper and the garbage cans and saying in little voice – “no, no” and then often affirming herself by saying “good girl”. This of course doesn’t mean that 20 minutes later she won’t be surrounded in piles of torn tissue, but it’s a start. She knows certain actions are not good.

Third, however, “good” is one of the primary words used to describe God. And when we speak of God being good we mean that He is the highest and greatest good. He is the source of all good whether it is the qualitative good (like good cooking) or the moral good (like right actions). God’s goodness makes Him incapable of being mean or evil because goodness is His nature, and this goodness leads Him to be continually generous and kind and benevolent towards all of His creation. God is good like water is wet; it’s more than just something He does, it is something He is.

And “good” is used in this sense all throughout the Bible.

James says “Every good and perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights.” (James 1:17)

And Jesus tells the rich young ruler “no one is good but God alone.” (Luke 18:19)

And Paul agrees saying “There is none who does good, there is not even one.... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom 3:12,23)

And on and on the texts go. God is the ultimate good and the source of all good that comes down to humanity.

And God’s goodness controls all of His other attributes. So God’s love is good, His kindness is good, His patience is good. And His justice is good, His wrath is good, and His jealousy is good. Everything about God is defined by His goodness. Now this is hard to fathom, and we are going to spend a whole Sunday on both His jealousy and His wrath, but today just know that all of God’s attributes come to us through His goodness. God is good.

And here is where we get to our text today because in verse 19, as God reveals Himself to Moses the first word He uses to define Himself is “goodness”. Come with me to the text.

2.) Exodus 33 in Context: Moses

Every time I read the story of Moses I am blown away by the things he says to God.

Just look at verses 12 and 13.

“Lord, You’ve been telling me to lead these people... but!... You’re not being much help”

“You’ve been saying “You know me by name” and “I’ve found favour in your eyes”... so show me what to do”

Or my favorite at the bottom of verse 13:

“Remember by the way, this nation is Your people God not mine!”

Moses speaks like he feels– he wants answers from God and he asks for them.

Do you ever wish you could speak to God like that in the midst of troubling times?
“Com’on God what’s up, why me? I’m dying here, give me some answers!”

...

Being from a Baptist heritage myself I know the importance of respect.

And yet the scriptures record bold words like these from many faith heroes like Moses or King David for example. And surprisingly they aren’t chastised for their words.¹

Actually, look at how verse 11 describes Moses. It says:

[Read Exodus 33:11a]

Moses isn’t seen as disrespectful, it is out of a friendship with God that he speaks. And his boldness goes from complaining about the difficulty of his job to asking to know God – or as he says in verse 18 – “Now show me Your glory”.

And God remarkably agrees!... He spoke with Moses as a man speaks with his friend.

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Exodus 33 in Context: God

I want to turn now from Moses to look at how God portrays Himself in this text, because this is really where the power of the story lies.

After Moses has made his appeal God responds with verse 17 and 19

¹ Ex 33:11 (Moses as Friend of God); 1 Sam 13:13-14 (David as Man after God’s own heart)

[Read Ex 33:17;19a]

Names in Old Testament times were tied closely with character. Today we don't think that much about what our names mean. But it hasn't always been that way. In European history family names were tied to occupation identity. So for example the Hoffman family traces its roots back to the 1300's and the Germanic tribes of Silesia. Hof meant settlement or farm and mann meant man. So a Hoffman was someone who owned their own land as opposed to working someone else's.

Of course in Korea our last name had a different meaning. Hoff in Korean means beer and man means 10,000 so I was the pastor of 10,000 beers over there – you can imagine how that went over.

But in all seriousness, the Western tradition of names is mostly connected to what we do rather than who we are. This wasn't the case in Israel. Their names were deeply connected to their character.

And so here in verse 19 when God says “I will proclaim my name in your presence” what He means is I will show you my character, my attributes, you will know me intimately.

But notice that God qualifies His name to Moses with his goodness. Verse 19 starts with God saying “I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you and I will proclaim my name.”

Now this isn't what we might expect God to say here. After all this was the first time Moses was going to see God – this is God's first impression so to speak. We might expect God to say I will cause all my glory to pass before you, or all my omnipotence or all my holiness. But instead God qualifies everything He is – His character, His personality, His temperament – with His goodness – God is good before He is anything else.

And this isn't the only place this happens, throughout the Old Testament God is talked about in the same way. Consider David's words in Psalm 34

“Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.” (Ps 34:8)

Or Psalm 119

“You are good, and what You do is good; teach me Your decrees.” (Ps119:68)

God is still glorious and holy, but He shows Himself as good to those who take refuge in Him and who learn His decrees.

Back to the picture of my father-in-law holding me up against the wall. He continues to be a powerful man who could really hurt me if he tried; but over the years I have learned that behind his hard words is a passionate desire for what is best for his daughter.

And that's something I desire too. And so, since my desires line up with his desires, I have nothing to fear from him. He means good for me.

Our text continues. Look at verse 20

[Read Ex 33:20]

Hmmm this is important. Though God's goodness meant Moses could know Him, and we can know Him through Jesus, this doesn't mean being around God is safe.

God is still terrible in power and worthy of the respect and worship that the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders we spoke of two weeks ago continually pour out before Him. God's goodness doesn't mean God has been de-clawed like a cat, it just means He keeps His claws sheathed towards those of us who are in line with His will.

As you already know I love C.S. Lewis and the Chronicles of Narnia because I think Lewis does a brilliant job of portraying Jesus in the form of Aslan the Lion.

In "The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe", the four children -- Peter, Susan, Lucy, and Edmund -- enter Narnia through a wardrobe in their uncle's home. Edmund has already given allegiance to the witch, who is the Devil, and sneaks off to join her ranks while the other children go to the house of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver who plan to take them to see King Aslan.

"Is - is he a man?" asked Lucy

"Aslan a man!" said Mr. Beaver sternly. "Certainly not. I tell you he is the King of the wood and the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea. Don't you know who is the King of Beasts? Aslan is a lion, *the* Lion, the Great Lion."

"Ooh," said Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie, and make no mistake," said Mrs. Beaver; "if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy.

"Safe?" said Mr. Beaver; "don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king I tell you."

...

And so God, in His un-safe goodness, reveals only what Moses can handle. To see my face would cause you to disintegrate into a pile of smoldering rubble. And so God's goodness makes a way. Verse 21

[Read Ex 33:21-23]

Without goodness God is a consuming fire of holiness, but with His goodness He makes a way for Moses to encounter, to taste and see as much of God as he is capable of handling.

Everything we know about God comes to us through His goodness.

3.) So with it established that God is good and that God's goodness is like glasses that we see all of His other attributes through.... We need to ask what do *we* do with this? How do *we* encounter – taste and see God's goodness – and what happens when *we* do?

I want to break this section into two and look first at what it means for God to want good for us? And second I want to examine the question “what's going on when God's goodness doesn't look good?”

3a) So first, what does it mean for God to want good for us?

Often people tell me “God wanting our good” means He desires to bless us with good things like financial stability, health or relational strength.

After all these are the things we want for ourselves and those we love. Of course God must want these things for us.

To back this up people quote scriptures like:

“If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”
(Matthew 21:22)

And certainly there is some truth to the idea. The opposite obviously isn't true. God isn't sitting up in Heaven willing our poverty and sickness – that would be a malicious God. But there is a serious problem with the “Health and Wealth Gospel” as it is called, and that is that its god is nothing more than a Divine Butler or Cosmic Therapist who “exists to help [us] through [our] problems and achieve what [we] desire.”² This god is all about us.

If this is who you imagine God to be I have bad news for you. God isn't all that concerned with our comfort or our happiness. And the reason why is that fixing our problems and achieving our desires isn't the good God wants for us.

Hear this: God wants our ultimate good, not just our temporary happiness. Like a kid who asks their mom for a cookie before dinner, we often ask God for things that seem good to us, but that don't lead to our ultimate good.

² Jethani, Skye. “With: Reimagining the way you Relate to God” (Nashville: Thomas Nelson), 2011. pg 63

Now I'm not talking about asking for frivolous things like new cars or winning the lotto – of course those things are not our ultimate good, but I'm talking about good things like health or even life itself. These are not the ultimate good that God wants for us. And while God isn't happy when we are sick or when we die sometimes He allows these things in order to bring about the ultimate good that He desires for us.

This is hard... So what is God's ultimate good for us?

Consider Jesus' words in John 15

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that **my joy** may be in you and that **your joy** may be complete." (John 15:9-11)

Notice two things here. First notice that the verse ends with Jesus telling us that our joy will be **complete** if we remain in Him. The word for **complete** here means "full of, abounding in, or completely under the influence of" joy. This is what Jesus wants for us.

But then notice how we get that. Jesus doesn't say "I will give you health and long life and happy relationships so that your joy will be complete." No, He says "remain" or "abide" in my love. Keep my commands and abide with me in my love. And if you do this **then** Jesus says **His joy** will be in us and **our joy** will be complete.

A couple chapters later in John 17, Jesus prays:

Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You. For You granted Him authority... that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him. Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent. (John 17:1-3)

We get the same thing here. When the New Testament talks about "eternal life" it doesn't primarily mean life that goes on and on forever – that's true as well, but that is a secondary meaning. The primary meaning has to do with **quality** more than **quantity**. And the picture is abundant life, overflowing life.

And how does Jesus say we get this life? He says "Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent."

Throughout this series we have been emphasizing that God created us for community with Him. He created us to share the community He has with Himself, Father, Son and Spirit – you and I are invited into relationship with the Triune Creator of the Universe!

Do you see? God *is* the good – the ultimate good that He wills for us! Our best good is to be in relationship with Him. This is what we were created for and only when we are here can we be truly joyful. God is good and He wants you to have Him. Do you want Him? Do you want that good folks?

3b) This leads us to our last question. What’s going on when God’s goodness doesn’t seem good?

It’s easy to affirm that God is good when we are experiencing blessings. When we get the job we have been praying for, we recover from illness, we work things out with people we love. But what happens when good Christians get sick, when our relationships break up and when we lose our jobs.

What happens when mills blow up and good Christian men, who spent their lives serving in church, paid their tithes and raised their children to be godly, get caught in explosions and suffer from severe burns all over their face and hands?

In the midst of these situations and the worst things we can imagine can we still say God is good and willing our good?

Here is where the real evil of the “health and wealth” god of our imaginations is seen. If we believe that God exists to make us happy then when these kinds of things happen we are forced to a couple of conclusions. Either 1.) God doesn’t exist or 2.) God exists but is punishing us for something or 3.) God exists but enjoys watching us suffer.

Friends don’t be deceived into worshipping that god – that god promises good things but leaves you battered and destroyed. That god is the devil. Worship YHWH, worship the God of the Bible who desires your ultimate good. Who wants you to have abundant joy and eternal life.

...

It’s true to worship YHWH means letting go of the false promise that you will never encounter hardship, but it also means when we encounter the hardships listed above we have an entirely different set of conclusions available to us. Listen to the words of Peter. A man who experienced hardships throughout his life and tradition tells us died being crucified upside down. He says:

...while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result...

God uses the hardships we encounter, though not good things in and of themselves, in order to bring about the ultimate good for us. This doesn’t make this easy, but Peter continues...

...May result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:6-9)

There we have it again. The troubles we encounter lead to that joy we talked about and the salvation of our souls.

Paul says “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose.”

This doesn't mean God gives Porsches and good looks to every Christian, it means that God uses every situation, even the incredibly difficult ones to bring about the ultimate good for those people who love God.

This is why Job, even after losing his wealth and his health and even his family can say “though He slay me, yet I will trust in Him.”³

Friends this is so much better than piles of temporary money, or even good health for us or our loved ones. While we may prefer comfort in the moment, God uses pain as a gift to draw us towards our ultimate joy and fulfillment.

C.S. Lewis says “God whispers to us in our pleasures, [and] speaks to us in our conscience, but [He] shouts to us in our pains.”⁴

Pain for non-believers or believers in the butler god is at best an annoyance - something to be soothed or numbed, but eyes of faith allow us to see pain for what it actually is – a stimulant to increase our hunger for something better, to look for the beauty behind the shadow and to soften our heart and allow God to lead us to what is actually our good.

This certainly doesn't mean that the hard times aren't hard, but it does mean the hard times aren't without hope because God is good, everything about Him is good and He is committed to giving the best gifts to us, not gifts of temporary comfort or happiness but our ultimate good – God gives us Himself.

Friends, God is good, all the time. In His goodness and power and knowledge He works every situation to our ultimate good. He is the Great Gentle Giant. All the time, God is good. Amen.

³ Job 13:15

⁴ Lewis, C.S. “The Problem of Pain (New York: Macmillan), 1944. Pg 81.