

Reflections on the Goodness of God

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The incident is found in all of the synoptic accounts (Mt. 19:16-22; Mk. 10:17-22; Lk. 18:18-23). A young, wealthy ruler was acquainted with the ministry of Christ. On a certain occasion, therefore, this official ran to Jesus, knelt before him, and asked:

“Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?”

In his response, the Lord asked:

“Why do you call me good? None is good except one, even God.”

Were it not for the fact that we are apprised that Christ “knew what was in man” (Jn. 2:25), and therefore we must conclude that the Master’s response was wholly appropriate, we might wonder why he answered in the fashion portrayed in the record. Certainly some have misconstrued Jesus’ answer and misused it for base purposes.

The “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” for example, allege that this context militates against the idea that Christ is deity. They reason thusly: Only God is good. Jesus denied that “good” should be applied to him. Thus, he repudiated the designation “God.”

The argument is false. Christ did not deny that he was “good.” He merely asked a question. He sought to probe the soul of the young ruler, awakening him to the nature of his vocabulary. In effect Jesus asked: “Since only God is good, and as you similarly designate me, are you willing to concede that I am divine?” In other words, if you inquire of me as to the acquisition of eternal life, are you willing to concede that I am qualified to answer your question?

The Lord was not denying his divine nature; he was affirming it! But let us explore the relevance of the affirmation that God is a good Being.

The Significance of “Good”

The term “good” is employed in a couple of important ways in the Scriptures. It may be used in a utilitarian sense (i.e., a thing is “good” because it is useful — it fulfills the purpose for which it was designed). On the first day of the creation week, God said: “Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good” (Gen. 1:4). Light is “good” in a practical way. James refers to the “good” gifts that come from the Creator (Jas. 1:17).

On the other hand, the word “good” is frequently used to signify character (i.e., moral goodness). It is in this sense that God is “good.” The Psalmist proclaimed: “Good and upright is Jehovah: Therefore he will instruct sinners in the way” (Psa. 25:8). Though Joseph had endured many hardships in Egypt, when he reflected upon these events near the end of his life, he acknowledged that, in the providential scheme of things, God was working that which was “good” (Gen. 50:20).

There is another matter that must be emphasized with reference to goodness. The term “good” may be employed in either an absolute, or in a relative way. Absolutely speaking, only God is “good.” He alone possesses goodness in infinitude. This is what Jesus had in mind when, to the young ruler, he said: “No one is good except God.”

While it is a fact that only deity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) possesses goodness absolutely, it is nonetheless true that human beings can be “good” relatively. An inspired writer affirmed that: “A good man shall obtain favor of Jehovah; But a man of wicked devices will he condemn” (Prov. 12:2). In the New Testament, Luke, the historian who authored the book of Acts, described the generous and dedicated Barnabas as “a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (Acts 11:24).

With these preliminary matters understood, let us consider some of the profound truths associated with the concept of God as an absolutely “good” Being.

“Goodness” and the Existence of God

As one carefully reflects upon the concept of goodness, one fact becomes apparent. Good, in the moral sense of the term, exists only in conjunction with personality. Professor M’Callen of London College of Divinity expressed it like this:

“Moral goodness can only exist for personal minds. The ideal of absolute goodness can only exist in a mind from which all reality is derived. Goodness cannot be explained on naturalistic or evolutionistic grounds” (1960, 253).

If the Universe consists solely of matter; if it merely is a conglomerate of molecules in motion, then it is foolish to even speak of moral goodness. The late Dr. James D. Bales was fond of saying that if “matter” is all there is, then to say, “I think” or “I feel,” is the equivalent of saying “I itch.”

The French existentialist, Jean Paul Sartre, argued that if God does not exist, it is meaningless to speak of “good.”

“The existentialist . . . finds it extremely embarrassing that God does not exist, for there disappears with Him all possibility of finding values in an intelligible heaven. There can no longer be any good a priori, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it” (1961, 485).

We would affirm, therefore, that the very recognition of “goodness,” when that ideal is pursued to its logical extremity, demands the existence of an ultimate standard of “good” that emanates from a Being whose character is wholly good.

God’s Goodness and the Problem of Evil

For centuries skeptics have argued that the presence of evil in this world negates the idea that a good God exists. It is alleged that if an all-powerful God exists, and he refuses to put an end to evil (and suffering), then certainly he could not be good.

The argument is fallacious. We do not have the space in this article to fully address this topic. Elsewhere, we have discussed [The Value of Human Suffering](#) in a more detailed fashion (cf. also Jackson, 113-120; Thompson, 28-31). We would, however, make three important observations.

God is not responsible for evil.

God is not responsible for the evil and suffering which plague our planet. Man introduced sin into this environment, and so death and all its attendant evils have followed in the wake of human rebellion (cf. Rom. 5:12).

The Creator endowed us with freedom of choice, but he is not accountable for our abuse of this exalted gift. Blaming God for our current woes is about like charging Henry Ford with the responsibility for the death of a person mortally wounded in a drunk-driving accident.

Is there any value?

The argument against the goodness of God on the basis of earthly evil assumes there is no valid purpose to be served by the Lord’s toleration of human tragedy. There is much to be said for the idea that allowing man to suffer the consequences of his transgression is a powerful educational procedure.

Too, does not suffering “nudge” us toward something that is “better” (Heb. 11:16)? If Jehovah does only what is right (Gen. 18:25), one must assume that there is a benevolent purpose in his permitting evil to endure for a while.

We are not qualified to judge God

In the final analysis, we must confess honestly that we simply are not qualified to judge what God is doing. Our scope of vision is microscopic.

This is one of the lessons the patriarch Job had to learn when, out of his pain, he became so critical of his Maker, questioning the Lord’s wisdom. God gave him an examination to show him how “dumb” he actually was (Job 38-41); Job was not in any position to subject the works of the Almighty to critical analysis.

The reverent student, with Paul, must confess:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past tracing out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?” (Rom. 11:33-34).

Manifestations of the Goodness of God

For those who have discernment, the manifestation of God’s good character is evident in abundance. Let us ponder several examples of such.

God’s Good Providence

God’s goodness is revealed by his providential activity in that he richly provides for his creatures through the skillfully designed systems he has ordained for the regulation of this planet.

Providence has to do with divine activity by means of the manipulation of natural law, in contrast to the miraculous operation of deity, in which cases natural law is suspended.

When Paul came to Lystra on his first missionary journey, he healed a man who had been unable to walk since birth. The effect of the miracle dazzled the citizens of the city, and they sought to worship Paul and Barnabas. But these men of God would have none of that. They encouraged the idolatrous folks of Lystra to “turn from these vain things [idols] unto a living God,” the Creator of the Universe.

Then, concerning the true God, they said:

“And yet he left not himself without witness, in that he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17).

Surely in the glow of the sunset, the refreshing rains of spring, the bountiful harvest of autumn, and in a myriad of other ways, the goodness of our Creator is obvious. Another biblical writer notes:

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning” (Jas. 1:17).

In spite of the fact that this planet is cursed with the effects of sin (cf. Rom. 8:20-22), there is still ample testimony of Heaven’s goodness. [For a further study of providence, see my commentary on the book of {glossSub (“Courier Publications”, “Job”)}, Chapter 13.]

God’s Good Communication

The Lord’s goodness is evidenced by the revelation of himself to humankind, both abstractly and concretely.

God has wonderfully revealed himself in the intricacies of a brilliantly designed Universe. “The heavens declare the glory of God; And the firmament showeth his handiwork” (Psa. 19:1).

“For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

Jehovah has truly left his “fingerprints” all over nature.

But God has not given evidence of his power and wisdom merely in the design of nature, thus leaving us without more precise information regarding him. No, his goodness is also manifest in a series of written documents which contain such an astounding array of evidence authenticating their supernatural character, that we can only stand in awe of them. The amazing unity of the Bible, its astounding prophecies, its literary precision — all of these factors, and many more — testify to the fact that the Scriptures are not of human origin.

God has spoken through the revelation of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2), which, in the context of the book of Hebrews, is the New Testament itself. A written, checkable medium of communication is strong evidence of the goodness of our Creator.

God's Good Redemptive Plan

The goodness of God is perhaps most supremely revealed, however, redemptively, that is, in the provisions the Lord has made for sinful man's salvation from the horrible clutches of evil. This is a magnificent concept.

The Elements of Redemption

There are several significant elements involved in the concept of redemption. Reflect upon the following.

First, there is the tragedy of human sin. Sin manifests itself in a number of hideous ways. It is reflected in the insolent attitude that shuts its ears to heavenly instruction (Jer. 11:10; Acts 7:57). It is seen in a hardened condition which is oblivious to evidence and refuses to believe (Jn. 12:37-40). Sin is transgressing the law of God (1 Jn. 3:4), and neglecting to do what is right (Jas. 4:17).

"Sin" (or some equivalent expression) has been acknowledged universally from time immemorial. The Roman philosopher Seneca said: "We have all sinned, some more, and some less." Ovid, the Roman poet, wrote: "We all strive for what is forbidden." A Chinese proverb says: "There are two good men: one is dead and the other is not yet born."

Scripture declares that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). In its wake sin has left disease, death, unhappiness, and frightful prospect of an eternal hell.

Second, God was under no moral compulsion to redeem humanity from the ravages of sin — unless one takes into consideration the throbbing compassion of his loving heart.

In one of Jesus' parables (Mt. 18:23ff), he told of a man who was head-over-heels in debt to his master. By modern standards, his liability was in the neighborhood of \$10 million. He had no earthly way to liquidate the obligation. There was but one resort — to beg! The slave fell down before his lord and pled: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you all." He did not need "patience," for he never would have been able to pay all. If one assumes that he made an average wage, which was about a dollar per week (cf. Mt. 20:2), and he used it all for payments, it would have taken 200,000 years to be debt free. The gentleman thus had an unrealistic view of his predicament.

However, in a thrilling statement, scripture says: "And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt" (18:27; cf. Lk. 15:20). In the imagery of the story, the lord is God; the slave is the sinner who has been immersed in the consequences of his sin. And the cancellation of the debt is a picture of the disposition of him who is "rich in mercy" (Eph. 2:4).

Third, the goodness of God was manifest in the demonstration of his love. It is one thing to love in word; it is an entirely different matter to love "in deed and truth" (1 Jn. 3:18). Jehovah did not love abstractly, much less theoretically; he loved actively — in the giving of his Son.

The situation is described so vividly in Romans 5.

"For while we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: for peradventure for the good man some one would even dare to die. But God commends his own love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (6-8).

Notice how we are described — weak, ungodly, sinners, and enemies subject to divine wrath (9-10). We are unable to fathom or to express the amazing goodness of our Creator as expressed in the gift of Christ (2 Cor. 9:15).

God's Goodness Motivates

As we meditate day and night on spiritual things (Psa. 1:2), we ought to think deeply and longingly about Heaven's goodness, because such reflections can motivate us to a better life.

Paul wrote: “Or do you despise the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).

Peter suggested that the longsuffering (goodness) of God is a reflection of his desire that no one be lost (2 Pet. 3:9).

It is such a comfort to know that our God is a Being of perfect goodness. Let us serve him with contentment.

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Matthew 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23; John 2:25; Genesis 1:4; James 1:17; Psalm 25:8; Genesis 50:20; Proverbs 12:2; Acts 11:24; Romans 5:12; Hebrews 11:16; Genesis 18:25; Job 38-41; Romans 11:33-34; Acts 14:17; Romans 8:20-22; Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20; Hebrews 1:1-2; Jeremiah 11:10; Acts 7:57; John 12:37-40; 1 John 3:4; James 4:17; Romans 3:23; Matthew 18:23; Matthew 20:2; Luke 15:20; Ephesians 2:4; 1 John 3:18; Romans 5; 2 Corinthians 9:15; Psalm 1:2; Romans 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9

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