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6 June 2010

Introduction

Our Scripture reading this morning, Psalm 107, begins with these words: *“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!”*

The great theme of this psalm is our subject for this morning: The goodness of God. Psalm 107, like all the psalms, is a song, one of the many spiritual songs inspired by God and given to His people, the Israelites. And like many songs, including some of the psalms, this song has a chorus. We find the chorus in verse 8: *“Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”* And if you look at verses 15, 21 and 31, you will find that same chorus: *“Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!”*

The chorus has that same theme – the goodness of the Lord. In fact, the song begins and ends with the goodness of the Lord. The word “mercy” in the very first verse is the same as the Hebrew word for goodness, so that verse 1 could just as legitimately be translated: *“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His goodness endures forever.”* Similarly, in the very last verse the word “lovingkindness” is once again the same Hebrew word, so that verse 43 could just as legitimately be translated: *“Whoever is wise will observe these things, and they will understand the goodness of the LORD.”* That is what this song, from beginning to end, is all about – the goodness of God.

We have been looking, these past few weeks, at the attributes of God, that is to say, what God is like. I would remind us all once again that this is essential knowledge for us all. We must find out what God is really like. We have to know Him as He really is. It is no use asking, as so many do, “What do you think God is like?” If God is real at all, then He has certain characteristics, He has a certain nature, and we cannot truly know Him if we are mistaken about that. It is essential for us to understand who God is. And He has revealed Himself to us in His word.

And so we have considered that God is infinite and eternal and unchanging. We have considered that He has complete power over all things, that He is sovereign, King over all, and nothing can interfere with the accomplishment of His purposes. We have considered that He exercises that sovereign power according to His perfect wisdom, so that He never does anything that is second-best. His purposes are flawless, however difficult we may find it to understand them at times.

We have seen also that God is holy; that He is infinitely higher than all His creatures, that He is pure and perfect, and the only legitimate object of worship. And then last time we saw that God is fundamentally just; that He is the one who defines right and wrong, and who acts as the perfect judge to enforce His perfect standard of righteousness.

These are some of the attributes of God, who is “infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth”, as the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches. And so now we come to consider the second-last attribute in that list – God’s goodness. We will look at the following headings:

1. God IS good.
2. God DOES good.

1. God IS good.

I want you to turn with me now to our other reading this morning, from the second book of the Bible, Exodus 33:12-34:8. This passage records how Moses asked for, and was granted, the privilege of seeing the glory of God, as we read in 33:18: *“And he said, ‘Please, show me Your glory.’”* Moses wanted to be shown the brightness of the glory of God.

Now, think about who was asking this. Moses was no ordinary man. No other man has ever interacted with God here on earth the way Moses did. He had already been given, on many occasions, the privilege of hearing God speak audibly to him. He had already seen the burning bush, which burned and burned but was never consumed, when God first commissioned him to lead the people out of Egypt. He had been used as God’s instrument to work mighty miracles in the land of Egypt, especially the ten plagues. He had been used by God to part the waters of the Red Sea, so that the people of Israel could walk across on dry land, and then to bring them crashing down again, so that the Egyptian soldiers following them were all drowned. God had delivered all the law to him, all the ceremonial and civil law that the people were to live by. He had spent forty days and nights on the mountain alone with God. And God was going to regularly speak to him directly throughout the rest of his life. Moses enjoyed a uniquely close and personal relationship with God, so much so that Deut 34:10 says of him, following his death, *“But since then there has not arisen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.”*

This is the man, who knows so much of God already, who now says to Him, *“Please, show me Your glory.”* And how does God respond? Ex 34:19: *“Then He said, ‘I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.’”* Moses asked to see His glory, and God said He would show him His goodness, and spoke of His mercy and compassion. And then, on the appointed day, when God actually does show him a portion of His glory, we read in 34:5-6: *“Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.’”* The LORD, in showing His glory to Moses, emphasises on the one hand His mercy, His grace, His longsuffering, His forgiveness of sins, and on the other hand His perfect justice, that we spoke of last week, whereby the guilty certainly will never escape their just punishment.

Remember, this is God displaying His glory to His favoured servant Moses. He could have said something like “The LORD, the LORD God, without beginning and without end, mighty in power, majestic and holy, abounding in understanding and wisdom, stretching out His hand from sea to sea and from pole to pole, so that the mountains shake and the nations tremble.” In other words, He could have emphasised His eternity and infinity and wisdom and might. But these things, though truly part of God’s nature, are not what He displays to His servant when asked to show him His glory. No, his glory is especially in His mercy and grace and longsuffering. His glory is in His truth, His glory is in His perfect justice, by which all men are judged. In other words – God’s glory is in His moral perfections! These are all aspects not of His power, not of His infinity, not of His wisdom, but of His goodness! His glory is in His goodness! God abounds in goodness, and that is His glory!

God is GOOD! Yes, He is all powerful and all wise and all knowing. Yes, He is not bounded by either time or space as we are. Yes, He is set apart from all His creatures, infinitely greater than they. Yes, He is completely perfect, and therefore unchangeable, unable to be improved on in any way. All these are certainly part of His glory, and we praise and adore Him for them all. But when it comes right down to it, when asked to reveal His glory, what He says is: “I am GOOD!”

Now this is very different to what most people mean when they say “I am good”, or “I am a good person.” On TV the other night there was a police drama where a man murdered the man who had murdered his girlfriend. The policeman who arrested him testified in court, saying, “I believe him to be a good person.” And the man himself refused any legal manoeuvring to get him off on a charge of manslaughter, saying “No, I’ve got to be honest. That man murdered my girlfriend, and so I went to his house intending to murder him. I shouldn’t have done it. I wish I hadn’t done it. But I did, so you need to punish me accordingly.” Most people in our society would agree with that policeman, that that man was basically a good, decent person who gave way to overwhelming anger in terrible circumstances.

But that is not what the Bible means by goodness. When the Bible speaks of goodness, and especially of God’s goodness, it is not speaking of goodness mixed with evil. It is not speaking of someone who is basically decent and does his best to be a law-abiding citizen. It is not speaking of someone who is just a nice, caring person, who tries to do the right thing but now and again fails. God’s goodness is infinitely greater than that. God’s goodness is absolute. God’s goodness is transcendent. God’s goodness is completely unmixed with evil in any form whatsoever. God’s goodness is perfect! To compare God’s goodness with ours is like comparing the light of the sun at noon with the flickering of a candle in the distance on a pitch black night.

God is truly, completely, utterly good. He is the definition of good. That is His glory. But it is also our shame, because that is the standard of goodness by which He judges us and by which we are to judge ourselves. With our sinful natures we are completely helpless to meet that standard. We can no more be truly good than a flickering candle can light the earth as the sun at noon. And so we all need to be jolted out of the complacency that says “I am basically okay.” You’re not! I’m not! When we begin to understand the reality of God’s goodness, we will also begin to understand the inadequacy of our own.

2. God DOES good.

Secondly, then, God DOES good. God’s nature is good, and so He acts in accordance with that nature to DO what is good. And this is how He displays His goodness to us – through the good that He does to us. So we see, in Ex 34:6, reference to God dealing with mankind in mercy, grace, longsuffering and forgiveness, as well as with perfect justice. These are some of the ways in which He does us good.

But there is one aspect of God’s goodness in particular that I would like to zero in on here. It is the aspect of GENEROSITY. When the Bible speaks, as it does here, of God being “abundant in goodness”, more often than not it is this idea of abundant generosity that is meant. The fact that God is a good God means that He is a God who loves to do good to His creatures. He is, in fact, overflowing with generosity towards us!

Turn back with me now to our other passage from Psalm 107. Remember I mentioned at the beginning the four choruses, in verses 8, 15, 21 and 31: “*Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!*” Each of these comes

towards the end of one of four stanzas of the song, each of which emphasises a particular aspect of the generosity of God towards His people, the Israelites. So let's have a quick look at each of those now.

After the introduction to the song in verses 1-3, the first stanza is in verses 4-9. *"They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; they found no city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them."* We are immediately reminded of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness for forty years. They were at times hungry and thirsty. Certainly at times their soul fainted within them; they were discouraged and despondent, ready to give up.

But we can also see here a picture of those who are not yet converted. How many people there are, going through their lives, wandering about as if in a wilderness! They are lost and desolate. They hunger for spiritual fulfilment. They thirst for a purpose to their lives. They know they are missing something, but they are not sure what. All they know is that their soul cries out within them, "What am I doing? Where am I going? What is life all about? Why am I here?" Millions of people throughout the world are lost in the wilderness, wandering through life without purpose, without hope, without Christ!

But again, is not that also the way we can so often feel? Even as Christians, there are often times in our lives when we feel like we don't know the way forward. We feel discouraged and despondent, and it is an effort just to keep on going from day to day. We feel that we are making no progress spiritually, and that God is far from us. We pray, and we read His word, but it seems dry to us, without nourishment.

Well, what did the Lord do for the Israelites in this situation? *"He led them forth by the right way."* He gave them a *"dwelling place"*. In other words, He gave them direction, and delivered them from their wanderings! He showed them the right way to go, and gave them a home!

Verse 9 says *"He satisfies the longing soul, and fills the hungry soul with goodness."* This is what God does for us! When we truly turn to Him, when we "cry out to the LORD in our trouble," as it says in verse 6, He leads us out of despondency, and satisfies our longing soul, and fills our hungry soul with goodness! He reveals Himself to those who seek him, so that they trust in Him and find salvation from their sins!

How generous God is! How much grace He gives! How much cause do the lost and wandering have to listen to the psalmist's call: *"Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!"*

The next stanza is from verse 10 to verse 16. Here the picture changes somewhat. *"Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, bound in affliction and irons— Because they rebelled against the words of God, and despised the counsel of the Most High."* The picture is all about bondage and imprisonment, but for a reason – because of rebellion against God. Given the history of the Israelites, this is almost certainly referring to the time when the people of Judah were taken into captivity in Babylon, after centuries of rebellion against God.

But again there is an obvious spiritual application as well. How many people are there who go through life rebelling against God, despising His word, and refusing to obey Him. Some He leaves to perish in their rebellion. But He deals with others as it says in verse 12: *"Therefore He brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help."* In other words, God deliberately makes their circumstances difficult. He deliberately brings them low. And the result is that they are shocked out of their arrogance and pride, until they realise their helplessness and call

out to the God that once they had no time for. And then He brings them out of their bondage to sin. He breaks the gates of bronze, and cuts the bars of iron in two, and breaks their chains in pieces, and brings them out of darkness and the shadow of death. They were on the way to spiritual destruction, they were heading for an eternity of affliction, but now they have been delivered! What generosity, what goodness God shows to the rebel!

In verses 17 to 22 the picture changes yet again. Here it is fools who are afflicted, because of their transgression and their iniquities, as it says in verse 17. Verse 20 speaks of them being delivered from their destructions. In other words, the picture here is of those who foolishly go on in sin against God. The result is that “their soul abhors all manner of food, and they draw near to the gates of death. There were a number of occasions in the history of the Israelites, particularly in the wilderness, when God sent sickness and death to them as punishment for their refusal to obey them, and perhaps this is what is being referred to here. The reference in verse 20 to them being healed would suggest this.

But again, the main application here is spiritual. How often do we hurt ourselves, even as Christians, by refusing to have done with our darling sins! How often do we go on in the same sinful ways, that we know in our hearts are wrong! And what happens? Our souls begin to abhor spiritual food, and we become spiritually sick. We backslide, and compromise, and become weak in our faith. But what does God do for us? He causes us to feel our lack. He causes us to realise that we are sick, that we are drawing near to the gates of spiritual death. And He makes us cry out to Him, and then He answers us. He heals us – how? By sending His word, as it says in verse 20. He causes us to hear it, so that whereas previously it has gone in one ear and out the other, now it is impressed on our hearts, and convicts us, and we are stirred up and given us the strength that we need to rise up and fight our own sins once again, where we had all but given up.

See once again the goodness of God! This is generous, that He should draw us back to Himself at the very moment when we are drifting away from Him! And when we find ourselves in that situation, having been healed, having been delivered from our own foolish destructions, we will be able to agree wholeheartedly with the psalmist in verse 22: “*Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declare His works with rejoicing.*” If you have ever backslidden, and been delivered from that, you know the joy that I’m speaking of here!

The fourth stanza is from verse 23 to verse 32. It pictures sailors out on the ocean, being tossed and turned by the force of stormy winds and waves, till they are at their wits’ end. We sometimes speak of the storms of life. And sometimes life seems like that, as if everything is going wrong all around us. Our illusion of order and control is shattered, and we feel completely at the mercy of circumstance, reeling to and fro and staggering like a drunken man, our soul melting because of all our troubles.

But here again God is generous. When we cry out to Him, in the midst of the storms of life, “*He calms the storm, so that its waves are still*”, as it says in verse 29, and guides us to our desired haven, as it says in verse 30. If we belong to Him, in the end He quiets the storm and brings us peace. For some of us those storms are much more severe than others, and sometimes they are prolonged greatly. Some of you know what it is to be at your wits’ end, as it says here. But God is good, God is generous, and in the end He will bring peace, and we will look back and say, “I thought I would never get through, but here I am, safe in my haven at last!”

God is good, and He does good to His people. His nature is to be generous. All we deserve from Him is to be despised for our weakness, and hated for our rebellion, and condemned for our sins, and sent to the eternal punishment that we all so richly deserve. But His nature is to be generous, to

be gracious and merciful and longsuffering and kind. And all the people of God down through the ages can testify that this is true from their own personal experience.

What about you? What do you know of the generosity of God? Can you speak of His goodness from your own personal experience? Do you know what it is to have been delivered from a lost, wandering, desolate state? Can you say that your chains have been broken, so that you have been freed from the terrible bondage of sin? Have you been delivered from your own foolishness, your own iniquities and transgressions? Have you been brought into your safe haven of peace and quiet in spite of all the terrible storms of life? Have you been given that most gracious, most generous gift of all – to have the Son of God die in your place, to have Him pay the penalty for your sins that you never could pay, to have His righteousness that you could never attain to be counted as yours, so that you may stand before God without fear, having been adopted as His own son or daughter? Then you will truly be able to sing the psalmist's chorus with all your heart, "*Oh, that men would give thanks to the LORD for His goodness, and for His wonderful works to the children of men!*"

But if not, if you are still lost, still in your storms, still in your troubles – worst of all, if you are still in your rebellion, still bound by your sins – then look at the other chorus. It is found in verses 6, 13, 19 and 28. "*Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses.*" The Lord is good. He is generous. He is gracious. But His generosity is greatest to those who cry out to Him in their trouble. Ask Him to deliver you. Ask Him to save you, and He will certainly do so.

Amen.

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