



## "Is God Really *Good-all-the-Time?*"

- 1 Samuel 5-6

by Pastor Tim Dodson

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It's hard to wrap your mind around it sometimes: *the chaos around us*. The world can seem like it is a crazy place, and there is plenty of pain, disaster, and angst to go around. Enough trouble

for everyone to have a share. Yet those of us that operate within the Christian realm are perpetually indoctrinated with the concept that "God is Good", and we join in the mantra chant when in public, but in the quiet dark of night we can lay staring at the ceiling and honestly not feeling that God is particularly "good."

When we read passages such as this, it can be hard again to wrap our minds around the craziness of the events. I mean "jeez...*the bubonic plague?* Seriously?" (1 Sam 5:6, NLT) Chapter 5 and 6 of 1 Samuel is hardly an uplifting children's story! Perhaps we could let this slide and bury it off in the biblical closet someplace, and simply attribute it to "righteous vengeance." But let's face it...this account is not a strange anomaly or a rare event. In fact, the bible has many such stories! I mean, who can forget the story of Noah's ark and the flood that nearly wiped out mankind? Or the time God opened up the ground in Numbers 16 and swallowed up entire families as punishment for their rebellion. And it's not just the events that God unilaterally *caused* but there is the multitude of those terrible events that He apparently failed to *prevent!* Not just in the old scriptural accounts, but modern events; recently disastrous typhoons, school shootings, the rape, murder and pillaging of ISIS, the approximately 45 million babies that were aborted last year throughout the world, child and spousal abuse, and world hunger? Can anyone really look at the state of the world and naturally say "God is good?"

To understand all of this, one must go back...*way back* to the garden. Let's take a look at how things were then; It was a perfect world. Without violence, without Monday morning work regiments, not to mention things like war and disease. From what we understand of Eden, we gather that it was as close to our grasp of 'paradise' as any place that ever existed on this earth. No storms and natural disasters, no adverse weather conditions, no mosquitoes, no war, no disease, no death. God said Himself that the place was "very good." And when you are limitless God, that is quite a work review!

There was no sin, thus there was no guilt, thus there was no shame. It was the life God intended for us, and the life He built for us without rent or price of any kind. The Genesis account tells us that "God walked in the garden" as did Adam and Eve. But when it all came to an end, who did it? Did God get up on the wrong side of the bed and throw everyone out? Or did mankind decide rather to ditch God for what they perceived as a better road? I mean, come on! All those trees they could eat from, and only *one* that was off limits! But we just *had* to go our own way...

You see, God also built into man the choice...the power of "freewill." For forced love and allegiance is not real love nor real loyalty. Even having kept us ignorant would still be a dishonest manipulation of the field of play, and therefore such was also not an avenue that God considered. Real love requires freewill...it requires a choice.

Thus we all received such free will even if we would now like to take a pass on it. And even though we may be quick to cry foul as to having inherited the chaos and "damaged goods" caused by Adam and Eve, let us be honest in our assessment of ourselves. For each of us have sinned...each of us individually and alone have chosen darkness instead of light! We didn't need Adam and Eve! For we all have "*fallen short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23) Both then until today, scripture reminds us that "*man loved the darkness rather than the light.*" (John 3:19)

Imagine if God had intervened. If God had stopped our efforts to sin. Do you think that really would have went over well with us? I mean, our parents tried that and how well did it work? Had he supernaturally tracked us like 'big brother' and intervened in every sin attempt like a cosmic version of the movie "minority report," it would have not changed our hearts nor would it have caused us to love God via such force. So we live today wanting God to stop all the world's 'bad stuff' ...intervene in all the terrible events of nature and remove all the pain of a fallen world, but still allow us to personally do *our* bad stuff. Now...*here's the tricky part*, who decides what is bad and what should be allowed? Uh,...*well*, that would be me! That's who I think should decide, and you think you should. Because in all of us is that same original sin of Adam and Eve...we all want to BE GOD. We all want to control. We all want to decide. We all want to have the power. And this all around us is the work of these pseudo gods. We did all this. Disease, war, hurt, inequality, ...*death*.

In the boat that dark night in Mark chapter 4...the storm was raging, the boat was taking on water and yet Jesus was asleep in the front of the boat. Finally...like we all have done, the disciples go to Jesus and kinda get up in His face and said "don't you care that we are going to die?" And what is the stuff of Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego, when they together said "*Oh king...our God can save us...and even if doesn't...even if you throw us into the flames and kill us, we still aren't going to bow down to your false gods.*" What vast chasm of distance separates these two events and the hearts and minds behind them! One group thought they knew best...what was 'good,' *and the other?* Well, they didn't know, but saw God according to *who He was, not what was happening around them at that moment. Not according to temporal circumstance.*

We can so easily forget a critical piece in this whole debate, and that is Romans 6:23..."*and the wages of sin is death.*" So...is there anyone out there today listening to this that is actually dead? No? Well, is there anyone out there that is actually *not a sinner?* No? Well, how can we understand all of this then? It's called "grace." God's free, and un-earned love, favor, and involvement. It the "free prize" in the box of salvation. So while we all deserve death, God has let us live because He loves us. Funny how no one claims that in that He is being "unfair!"

Our part is the acknowledgement that I am a sinner and will be every day of my life, that I stand righteous before God because Jesus paid my overdrawn credit card of sin, and that through the power of the Holy Spirit of God living in me, I will seek to live holy as God is holy. What's God's part? To make all that a reality by the cross and the gospels grace. Mine is *to choose* His way, just as I have and Adam and Eve *chose* to rebel. It's all choice.

So what does all this have to do with the bubonic plague in 1 Samuel 5? The comments of the people of Ashdod clearly tells us that they knew Jehovah was the real God. They knew He had the power of life and death, and until their back was against the wall, they refused to relent. They wanted to chose another god...another road...and another life. And because of that whole free will thing, they were able to do that. But the "*wages of sin is death.*" From the garden, making such a decision would then judicially hand down the verdict "*you shall surely die.*" (Genesis 2:17)

You see, ultimately the people of Ashdod as well as millions of people who have walked this earth since them, have *chosen* pain, chaos and death. And not just for themselves, but for all of us. (even if we had never personally chosen...IE- unborn aborted babies).

Today we all see and experience those who are hurting, the hopeless, the depressed and afraid. And it is these that in their pain will naturally ask "Is God really good?" And no doubt His goodness sure doesn't always look like our description of "good." How do we know he is good when we cannot see all that He is doing and all that He is arranging in the world at large, not just with the "center-of-the-world-*me*." What I have learned is, grief and pain is not unfamiliar to God either. Judges 10:16 *"And they put away the strange gods from among them, and served the Lord: and His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel."* Psalm 78:40 brings this thought, *"How often did they provoke Him in the wilderness, and grieve Him in the desert!"* Jesus Himself wept at the grave of His friend Lazarus. He felt crazy fear in the garden before the crucifixion.

Much of the problem today is we as disciples have muddled this up and misused our words and watered down this pure and holy trait of goodness about our good God. It's how we talk: "I was running late to work this morning, but every light I hit was green, and I found an awesome parking place and actually got there a few minutes early. Man, God is good!"

"Yep, God is good. I totally forgot about my exam and didn't have time to study, and when I got to class, the teacher had decided to postpone it to next week!"

"I have been praying about how to pay my mortgage, and then I got a bonus at work. God is good!"

Somehow in attempts to give God glory and recognize his good gifts and graces, I am afraid we are loose and irresponsible with our words. And it just doesn't work. It doesn't work for the poor and starving, for those grieving or suffering, or for folks who can't imagine having a car or a job to drive to. It doesn't work for us to correlate God's goodness with what he DOES for us. We have heard it said — "first-world problems" — when folks refer to their iPhones breaking or their cars not cranking. Could it be we've also invented "first-world blessings"? And if so, then is God only "good" to us over here in the United States, where there's not much talk of famine or hunger or martyrdom?

If God's goodness is measured by how quickly he magically alters traffic lights in our favor, then what on earth are we saying to the majority of the world about who God is? What are we saying to each other and to ourselves? And what am I saying to those who are sick or suffering great loss?

God IS good — he gave his only Son, rescuing us from hell, and he is a never-changing, ever-loving, ever-present God. *That* makes him good. Indeed He DOES good too: He heals, he provides clear direction, he gives us friends and laughter and sunsets and family and second chances and, yes sometimes maybe even green traffic lights. But these are all GRACE gifts — extras. Indeed they are good gifts, but they are not what makes Him good. Because if he never gave us one of these, he would still BE good.

He is with martyrs and cancer patients and grieving widows and mothers and starving little children in third world corners. He is still good in those dark places. No, these tragedies are not pleasant nor are they to us "good." But His presence never runs from them. He is still involved, albeit often with the 'long view' in mind. He no doubt still grieves and pains over the sin and hurt of life on this planet. But He has set in motion a plan of redemption. A way off this spinning rock of death.

He is good because he gave his Son to redeem us, and in doing so, he robbed death of its sting and gives us a final victory — a peace to look forward to even in the darkest times of this journey. So when we read passages like this and are tempted to pass judgment against the actions of God, let us acknowledge that if we really knew what good was, we would never sin and Adam and Eve would still be living in the garden. Was Jesus good

when He stood up in that boat and calmed the wind and the waves? Or was He *still* good when He was asleep in the front of the boat?

The Philistines suffered greatly, and they did so because they lived in rebellion against the true and living God as well as against God's people. We suffer because of our acts of sin, our hearts of sin, and our history of sin. So we now sometime hurt. We sometimes do not get what we want. We experience sickness on various levels, and we will all ultimately die of what we are sick of last. But as you take your next breath, remember that we only deserve death, and God has given us life. God has given us that breath. And for those who are His redeemed kids, He has also given us abundant life and eternal life and the promise to "never leave us...never forsake us" *even when things are hard...even when there is pain. Even when things are not good, the "good God" is with us.*