

CHAPTER I

THE GOODNESS OF GOD

God is good . . . all the time.

How do you feel when you read that sentence? Is your heart leaping for joy and enthusiasm? Or do you want to throw this book against the wall or flush it down the toilet? If you're currently suffering a trial or disappointment, or know someone who is, my suspicion is that you might opt for the latter. It may be difficult to believe that God is good . . . all the time.

In the midst of a world where bad things happen to good people, our faith in the goodness of God can falter. In fact, our faith in God's existence can falter. Just last week a wheelchair-bound mother with multiple sclerosis told me how her twenty-year-old son said to her, "How can you believe in a God who would allow this to happen to you?"

His question is honest and haunting.

The tragedy of evil, pain, and suffering is its ability to disconnect us from God, to make God feel distant, far away, and coldly uninvolved in our lives and our suffering. However, God's greatest desire is just the opposite: to be connected to us, to be actively involved in our lives. God wants to communicate his goodness to us, even when life doesn't go our way and the future is uncertain.

If God is good all the time, then what does this goodness look like? I once read a story about a young new pastor and his wife who were assigned to reopen a run-down, inner-city church. The story appeared in a 1954 edition of *Reader's Digest*. Here's a summarized version:

Once long ago an old church had flourished, but now the good days had passed from that section of town. However, the pastor and his young wife believed in their run-down church. They felt that with paint, hammer, and faith, they could get it in shape. Together they went to work.

Late in December a severe storm whipped through the river valley, and a huge chunk of rain-soaked plaster fell out of the inside wall of the church just behind the altar. Sorrowfully the pastor and his wife swept away the mess, but they couldn't hide the ragged hole. And Christmas was only two days away.

That afternoon the dispirited couple attended a benefit auction. One of the items was a handsome gold and ivory lace tablecloth, nearly fifteen feet long. The pastor was seized with what he thought was a great idea. He won the bid for \$6.50. Delighted, the pastor carried the cloth back to the church and tacked it up on the wall behind the altar. It completely hid the hole! Happily he went back to preparing his Christmas sermon.

Just before noon on Christmas Eve, as the pastor was opening the church, he noticed a woman standing in the cold at the bus stop. “The bus won’t be here for forty minutes!” he called, and invited her into the church to get warm.

She told him that she had come from the city that morning to be interviewed for a job as governess to the children of one of the wealthy families in town, but she had been turned down. A war refugee, her English was imperfect.

The woman sat down in a pew and rested. She looked up as the pastor began to adjust the great gold and ivory cloth across the hole. She rose suddenly and walked up toward him, looking at the tablecloth. The pastor smiled and started to tell her about the storm damage, but she didn’t seem to listen. She took up a fold of the cloth and rubbed it between her fingers.

“It’s mine!” she said. “It’s my banquet cloth!” She lifted up a corner and showed the surprised pastor that her initials were monogrammed on it. “My husband had the cloth made especially for me in Brussels! There could not be another like it.”

For the next few minutes the woman and the pastor talked excitedly together. She explained that she was Viennese; she and her husband had opposed the Nazis and decided to leave the country. Her husband put her on a train for Switzerland, and they planned that he would join her as soon as he could ship their household goods across

the border. She never saw him again. Later she heard that he had died in a concentration camp.

“I have always felt that it was my fault—to leave without him,” she said. “Perhaps these years of wandering have been my punishment.” The pastor tried to comfort her and urged her to take the cloth with her. She refused. Then she left.

As the church began to fill on Christmas Eve, it was clear that the cloth was going to be a great success. It had been skillfully designed to look its best by candlelight.

After the service, the pastor stood at the doorway. Many people told him that the church looked beautiful. One middle-aged man, the local clock and watch repairman, looked rather puzzled.

“It is strange,” he said in his soft accent. “Many years ago my wife—God rest her—and I owned such a cloth. In our home in Vienna, my wife put it on the table”—and here he smiled—“only when the bishop came to dinner.”

The pastor suddenly became very excited. He told the jeweler about the woman who had been in church earlier that day. The startled jeweler clutched the pastor’s arm. “Can it be? Is she alive?”

Together the two got in touch with the family who had interviewed her. Then, in the pastor’s car they started for the city. And as Christmas Day was born, this man and his wife, who had been separated through so many Christmases, were reunited.¹

The husband and wife had been disconnected for many years, but the tablecloth brought them back together. The goodness of God reconnected them; he brought them into the warmth and presence of each other through the “apparent” tragedy of a severe storm.

God wants to do the same thing for you—to reconnect you to himself, to bring you into his presence and warmth, whether it’s been a couple of days or a couple of decades since you’ve felt that connection. God wants you to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that *he exists, and that he cares for you personally*—like the couple and the tablecloth—even when the storms in life seem to create gaping holes instead of wonderful reunions.

A SECOND TOUCH

The Gospel of Mark tells the story of a blind man who needed to experience the goodness of God, who needed to know that God cared for him personally, even in the midst of blanketing darkness (8:22-25). Some friends bring the man to Jesus and beg Jesus to touch him. Jesus touches the man’s eyes, but when the man first opens them, his vision is fuzzy. People look like trees. Only when Jesus lays his hands on the man’s eyes a second time is his sight perfectly restored.

This man’s experience may be a reflection of our own. Perhaps in the past you felt a touch of the Master’s hand, you felt connected to God, but now you need a second touch; you need to

know *again* that God is good (all the time) and that he cares for you personally. You need Christ to come along and touch the ragged hole in your heart and reconnect you with God.

St. Paul is another marvelous example of someone who became reconnected to God. In the Book of Acts, his name is Saul, and he’s on a mission—to destroy the infant Church and all those who follow Jesus on “the way.” However, on Saul’s way to Damascus, a light suddenly flashes around him, and a voice says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Saul asks, “Who are you, sir?” and the voice answers, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (see Acts 9:4-5).

Saul gets up, the Bible tells us, but when “he opened his eyes he could see nothing” (Acts 9:8). It wasn’t until three days later, when Ananias prays for Saul and something like scales fall from his eyes that he can see. He can now see with the eyes of faith, not just with human eyes, and his life is never the same.

How do we learn to see with the eyes of faith? It’s not always easy, but when we hear stories about others who have seen with the eyes of faith, it builds up our own faith.

A friend of mine named Patty experienced desperate financial difficulty early in her marriage. One day she needed milk and toilet paper, but she only had enough money to buy one or the other. At the store, she stood debating about which one to buy. Finally, she decided on the milk.

That night she and her family were awakened by a noise outside their home, and they went to the front door just in time to see

a car speeding away. And what to their wondering eyes should appear? Their trees were completely covered with toilet paper, and there were four rolls sitting on their porch. Someone had toilet papered the wrong house! When they told the story to a friend, the friend said, “Thank goodness you bought the milk—otherwise you might have found a cow on your porch!”

Even in the midst of financial desperation, Patty saw those toilet-papered trees with the eyes of faith. She experienced God’s goodness—that he exists and cares for her personally—and it’s an experience she’s never forgotten.

In our own lives, God wants to give us the eyes of faith, especially when it comes to our personal history and our understanding of the Bible. Instead of seeing the Bible as a tedious description of this person begetting that person or this nation fighting that nation, we can see God’s story—and *our* story woven into his. Bible scholar Dr. Scott Hahn has a marvelous ability to see Scripture with the eyes of faith: he sees the story of God extending his covenant love from one holy couple (Adam and Eve) to one holy family (Noah) to one holy tribe (Abraham) to one holy nation (Israel) to one holy kingdom (David) to one holy people (the Church).

GOD’S LOVE IS INCLUSIVE

When we see God’s story in Scripture with the eyes of faith, we learn that God’s love is not exclusive but inclusive. *No one* is excluded from the Father’s love. This was hard for St. Paul

to get at first, but when he got it, he really got it! Here’s how he described this truth in Ephesians 1:3-5: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, as he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and without blemish before him. In love he destined us for adoption to himself through Jesus Christ, in accord with the favor of his will. . . .”

St. Paul got it! Even before God created the world, he had a plan—and that plan was to bring everyone into his family as his adopted sons and daughters. He chose you, in Christ, before the world began, to be part of his family. His one desire from all eternity has been to be connected to you through his family.

I have a number of friends who have adopted children, and one thing I’ve noticed is that it’s never an easy process. Some dear friends named Ann and Sam had been married about fifteen years and were unable to have children. Finally, through an adoption agency in the United States, they got word of a young single woman in Texas who was pregnant and planning to give up her baby for adoption.

They were so excited. They started the legal and financial process to pay for the adoption. Ann quit her job, and they moved to a larger house in anticipation of starting their family. Then they got the news: after giving birth, the woman and her child disappeared and couldn’t be found. My friends were crushed.

Then I received an e-mail message from Ann, who was writing from Lebanon. Her husband, Sam, is Lebanese American, and

they had really wanted to adopt from Lebanon. However, adoption is highly discouraged in that culture because the extended family is expected to care for a child rather than release the baby for adoption. As a result, Ann and Sam had hit wall after wall whenever they had tried to pursue adoption in that country. Suddenly they were in Lebanon with their newborn adopted daughter, asking for prayers for the paperwork to be completed so they could bring her home. After four months, Ann and Sam returned home with their darling Lebanese daughter. Ann and Sam went through great effort, heartache, and financial cost to adopt their daughter, but I can tell you, it was worth it!

BAPTISMAL ADOPTION

God the Father has done the same with you. He's gone through great effort, heartache, and the cost of the cross to adopt you into his family, but it was so worth it! You are so worth it to God that he would have sent his Son even if you were the only person on earth, because he chose *you*, in Christ, before the world began.

Ann and Sam traveled from the United States to Lebanon to adopt their daughter and had to wait four months to get her passport before they could bring her home. Jesus Christ traveled a much greater distance; he traveled the infinite distance from heaven to earth to become one of us so that you could be adopted into the family of God. And he's given you not an earthly

passport but a spiritual passport, a passport to heaven. And he's done this through your baptism.

Sometimes I think it's easy to forget how utterly earthshaking baptism is, how it really changes us from being spiritual orphans to being part of the family of God. After the scales fell from Saul's eyes, he immediately wanted to be baptized. During his time of physical blindness, God opened the eyes of his heart to see the goodness of God through baptism—the baptism that reconnects us to God, to the Trinity, and makes every person, whether Jew or Gentile, part of the family of God.

At your baptism, God marked you with an indelible seal, what the Church calls your baptismal character. This is your spiritual passport, and it doesn't say "American" or "Italian" or "German"—it says "Christian." You belong to Christ. You belong to God. His blood runs through your veins.

History is, indeed, his story, but it's also *your* story—the story of God's choosing one holy couple, one holy family, one holy tribe, one holy nation, one holy kingdom, and one holy people so that he could adopt you into the family of God through your baptism.

GOD CARES FOR US

Baptism is just the beginning of being reconnected to God, of experiencing the goodness of God in our lives. God wants us to experience his goodness throughout our lives—to have the eyes