

Sermon Series

Skepticism: Where Faith Engages Doubt

²²Be merciful to those who doubt; Jude 22; *NIV*

February 21, 2010

Text: Psalm 119:68-72; Exodus 33:19; 34:6-7; Luke 18:19; Romans 3:12

Good God?

Introduction:

I wonder if Job doesn't cringe everytime he hears one of us say, "I love the story of Job." People who make that statement have not lived the story! Or they have lived the story fully to the very end, and lived to tell about it. Keeping our faith in a good God is not easy while enduring intense suffering and evil.

Childhood prayer . . .

God is great.
God is good.
Let us thank him,
for our food.

Among the first things we learn about God is that he is great and he is good! God is great. There is no one greater. And he is good. There is no one else "gooder" better. The attributes stand together.

If God is great but not good, we live in fear not faith. May be he will hate us. May be he will curse us. It was the plight of the pagan. They had no doubt about the existence of god or gods. They worshiped nearly every conceivable god. But the gods were not good. In fact, they were generally worse than humans. The gods had to be appeased not loved. They had no assurance that their gods would bless them. They made all kinds of sacrifices to satisfy the gods when they were angry—even child sacrifice. Preferably, they wanted the good life. But at the very least they wanted to avoid being cursed.

They assumed that if life went well—food, shelter, clothing, family, livestock, harvest, water, health, peace—then the gods were happy. If instead they endured disaster, pestilence, famine, draught, war, then the gods were angry. They feared their gods. They did not trust their gods. Christians can fall into this pagan way of relating to God.

If God is great but not good, there is no cross . . . no tomb . . . no hope.

If God is good but not great, we live in despair not hope. We may like our gods or even admire them. But if our God is not great, we have no confidence that he will be able to meet our needs and bless our lives. So how do we relate to a good, but not great god?

Like an ambitious political opportunist, life becomes a dangerous intrigue of switching one's allegiance at just the right time. And that's the way the pagans approached their gods. They had their favorites. But if their favorite god was losing, they had no qualms about changing gods. They had kind of a "Lane Kiffen" approach to faith! They lived without assurance. Life was a lottery. And the chances of winning were remote.

If God is good, but not great, the tomb is not empty!

Growing up my sister had a little "TV" chair. It was multicolored. It doubled as a step stool when you put the back down. It was the perfect seat for 2-3 year-old to set and watch TV. We would be watching a game or horse race and visitors would ask Doris which team she wanted to win. She'd fold her little hands and say, "Who's winning?" Of course, that became her team. If the other team scored and went ahead, some adult would say, "Oh Doris, your team's behind?" And she would say, "I changed my mind. I want that team to win." Amazingly, her team always won.

Unbelievers still tend to go with the faith, philosophy, or new age mystery religion

that promises to give them what they want. Fame, fortune, health, fitness, whatever god can get you what you desire. And believers are not immune to these forces.

Some doubt God because they just can't accept that Jesus is the only way to true lasting life. But others find the idea of God's greatness and goodness to be simply unbelievable. Why?

Short answer—life! The presence of evil and suffering cause many to doubt God—either his existence altogether or his trustworthiness.

After the massive tsunami which killed more than a ¼ million people around the rim of the Indian Ocean, newspapers and magazines were filled with the question, “Where was God?” One reporter wrote: “If God is God, he's not good. If God is good, he's not God. You can't have it both ways, especially after the Indian Ocean catastrophe.”

It is an old argument traced back to the Greek philosopher, Epicurus nearly 300 years before the birth of God's answer to such doubt.

Is God willing to prevent evil, but unable?

Then he is not all-powerful.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is evil.

Is he both able and willing?

From where does evil come?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

~ Epicurus circa 300BC

We may consider this as nothing more than an intellectual curiosity—an academic debate. But when evil or suffering touches our home and our hearts, we understand Jude's reminder to “show mercy to those who doubt.” Is God good? Have you ever felt like putting God on trial? Had we walked in their shoes, we might have.

The scene is set in Auschwitz. Jewish prisoners are conducting a trial of God. Has he abandoned His people and broken his covenant? The evidence has been heard. The verdict is about to be announced. When a man who has been silent rises to speak.

Video - God on trial . . . You can watch it here. . .

http://www.spectrummagazine.org/blog/2009/09/07/god_good

“God is not good. He was just on our side. . . . He was simply strong, but not good. Abraham should have said, NO! . . . **We should have taught God the justice that was in our hearts.** . . . We have become the Amalekites. He has turned against us. He is no longer our God. We have become God’s enemies. . . . He has made a new covenant with someone else.”

We may dismiss the arguments. We may refuse to consider the complaints against God. But if we do, we may someday find ourselves living in the same prison—a crucible of suffering. What then? Be merciful to those who doubt.

It is striking to me that in this portrayal there is no discussion of whether or not God exists. Good God? . . . is the only question. The spokesman makes several points against which we might argue. His conclusion about God's nature is misguided. But his right about one thing for sure. God did make a new covenant with someone else. But what we want the world to know (including the people portrayed in this video) is that the new covenant includes them!

Have you struggled with those doubts? Are you struggling now? Do you feel like Job, Confused, but unyielding in your trust of God? Or like Job’s wife, have you had enough of God? How do we deal with evil and the suffering that prevails over the earth?

The presence of evil has led some to *deny his existence*. They simply cannot believe in a God who would cause or even allow human suffering. The prevalence of human suffering has led others to conclude that whether he exists or not, *he cannot be trusted*.

Hillary, an undergrad English major, put it this way.

I just don't believe the God of Christianity exists. God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might be all-good but not powerful enough to end evil and suffering. Either way the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't

exist.

Rob, Hillary's boyfriend added,

This isn't a philosophical issue to me. This is personal. I won't believe in a God who allows suffering, even if he, she, or it exists. Maybe God exists. Maybe not. But if he does, he can't be trusted. [Keller, *The Reason for God*, 22]

Make no mistake, the Bible teaches that God is great and good.

³For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods. Psalm 95:3; *NIV*

⁶⁸You are good and what you do is good;
teach me your decrees. Psalm 119:68; *NIV*

How then do we explain the existence of human suffering? Beyond explanations, how do we endure suffering and keep our faith?

The skeptic *believes* that the presence of evil and suffering shows God doesn't exist or if he does he can't be trusted.

A few questions or observations that may point us in the right direction—lead us out of this maze: Let's interrogate our doubts:

- 1) Must only *Christians* answer for the presence of evil? Are we the only ones facing the problem? Every philosophy, religion, belief system must account for human suffering. Do atheism and evolution offer better solutions? Does it make any sense to reject God because of the presence of suffering and then embrace a philosophy of evolution built upon violence? The evolutionary mechanism of natural selection *depends* on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak (Keller, *The Reason for God*, 26). Isn't it ironic that an age that loves evolution hates injustice? We live in a culture of four-letter words, yet we can't stomach two three-letter words—God & sin! Is there another god or religion

that offers a better reason . . . a better way? Whatever else we might say about the verdict of Auschwitz, they knew that denying God's existence was not one of the options open to them. He is! The Christian believes the foundational answer for the question of human suffering is sin. And that doesn't mean we can attribute every calamity to some particular sin. But we do know the underlying cause of why life is so hard.

We must continue our interrogation regarding the presence of evil.

2) Does God have purpose for human suffering (Ps 119:71)?

⁷¹It was good for me to be afflicted
so that I might learn your decrees. *NIV*

Just because we can't see any point to human suffering doesn't mean there isn't one. Most people would have to admit that much of what they really needed for success in life came to them through hardship . . . through painful experiences. This is no cliché that we are to flippantly pass on to those who are hurting. But it is a promise that Paul learned and taught and lived.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. . . . 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. Romans 8:18,28; *TWIV*

We often ask, "Does God cause evil?" or "Does God allow evil?" May be the more important question is, "What has God done about human suffering? What has he done for and with human suffering?"

The Christian can believe and trust that God has purpose for his/her suffering - even glory!

But our interrogator is not finished with us. Some questions are hard, because they humble us to the core.

3) Can we discern good from evil? (Luke 18:19)

A rich young man came to Jesus and asked, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

¹⁹"Why do you call me good?" ~ Jesus (Luke 18:19a; *NIV*)

Do you really understand goodness? Do you understand who I am? "No one is good—except God alone, . . ."

Before we start throwing around ideas of goodness, we must learn who God is and who we are in our fallen state.

Moses understood that he didn't understand.

¹⁹And the Lord said, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

Exodus 33:19; *NIV*

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

Exodus 34:6-7; *NIV*

Our judgments about God are dependent upon God's revelation (Ex 33:19; 34:6-7).

¹²All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one." Romans 3:12; *NIV*

Our ability to judge is distorted (Rom 3:12).

Our current happiness is not the standard by which to judge God's goodness.

Our assumptions are faulty:

a) God must be good & great *in our eyes* or he cannot be good God. We put

God on trial. Just because God may not appear to be good in our sight doesn't settle the issue of his nature. Our sight is faulty and distorted by our sin.

b)) We think we understand what it means to be good. But the truth is, we often don't.

Our final question . . .

4) Does God understand our suffering! A more important question.

Do you feel as though God isn't answering your prayers? Are you tempted to doubt His goodness? When I feel this way, I have to remind myself that my circumstances aren't the barometer of God's love and goodness—*the cross is*. He has shown how good He is by giving His only Son Jesus to die for our sin. We can't rely on our feelings. But day by day as we choose to trust Him more, we learn to believe with confidence that God is good—all the time. — [Anne Cetas](#)

When you are tempted to deny
God's goodness, love, and grace,
Look to the cross of Calvary,
Where Jesus took your place. —Sper

Conclusion:

Who is really on trial in the story of Job (Job 38-42)? Job's friends put Job on trial as they attempt to defend God. They find it easier to doubt Job's goodness than to rethink the whole issue of suffering and whether or not it touches God's people. Job is quite sure that he's done nothing to deserve his suffering. Is Job doubting God's goodness?

Finally the Lord speaks,

The LORD Speaks

1 Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said:

2 "Who is this that obscures my plans
with words without knowledge?

3 Prepare to defend yourself;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.

4 "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

Tell me, if you understand.

5 Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

6 On what were its footings set,
or who laid its cornerstone—

7 while the morning stars sang together
and all the angels shouted for joy?

God continues to ask penetrating questions of Job revealing his (and our) lack of understanding with regard to life and why things go as they sometimes do. Suffering is not only hard to endure, it is even harder to understand. Job didn't. Neither did his friends. God humbled his servant for four long chapters, with but one brief statement from a very humble Job. "How can I reply to you? I will be quiet now. I have no answer (40:4-5; a paraphrase).

And then Job speaks in chapter 42.

Job

1 Then Job replied to the LORD:

2 "I know that you can do all things;
no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

3 You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?'
Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me to know.

4 "You said, 'Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
and you shall answer me.'

5 My ears had heard of you
but now my eyes have seen you.

6 Therefore I despise myself
and repent in dust and ashes."

God is good all the time.
All the time God is good.

We must remember that when suffering comes our way.

God's goodness is great like nothing else. He entered our trial. He allowed God the Father

to put him on trial for our sins. He took our place. What a gift. We dare not let this gift slip through our fingers because we can't understand or answer all the questions concerning evil and suffering. What we do understand is the greatness and goodness of God who planned, prepared, paid for, and presented his gift to us.

Illustration: Several years ago our oldest son Michael gave us an extremely thoughtful and costly gift for our anniversary. I can still hear the excitement in his voice . . . and later the joy in his eyes It was his idea. He had ordered on-line a dinner cruise on the Tennessee River for us. It touched our hearts.

It was just after Mary's surgery. At first we wanted to wait until the hot summer past. And then fall came. She was still unsure about whether a two-hour dinner cruise would be enjoyable until her back healed more. The next Spring, we thought. Every so often I would notice the gift certificate.

Before we knew it, it was summer again. Too hot. We will wait until fall. The fall came and went. For sure next Spring we will take the cruise. As the weather began to warm, we decided we'd go.

I looked up the number to call for the reservations. As I did I noticed another number printed on the certificate I had not noticed before. My heart sank. Tears came. I called immediately. The answer was no. They would not honor the expired gift certificate. I pleaded three different times. I felt like Esau. But the his gift had slipped through our fingers and the sadness broke my heart and I wept like a small child. I even wrote a letter to the company asking for mercy. None came. Sure I could have purchased the tickets. But that wasn't the same. It was his special gift. And it was gone . . . too late.

There is a greater sadness for those who let our Lord's greater gift slip through their fingers!

Theologians debate . . . hell. It is literal. Is it eternal. But for me, the deepest remorse is not the punishment. Rather it is the knowledge throughout eternity that a special gift which he prepared with such thought and delight, even joy . . . the Godhead planning, delighting, the greatest joy in the gift he would give humanity - "for the joy set before him he endured the cross!" How our negligence with his gift must break his heart. But I'm here today to tell you that he, and he alone, can lift your sadness and turn your tears to dancing!

Do you remember the epoch ending to that epoch trilogy, *The Lord of The Rings*? Sam sees Gandalf and exclaims: "Gandalf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. *Is everything sad going to come untrue?*"

The Christian can answer, "YES!"

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the lord my soul to take.*

Good God. He is!