

The Unique Goodness of God

Stephen Kasun | Psalm 119:65-72

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I will be preaching from Psalm 119:65-72. We're taking a sharp left turn from Luke into the OT, and into the book of poetry, the Psalms. Because we are jumping in the middle of the book of Psalms, and even in the middle of a Psalm itself, we need to locate ourselves so that we might get a foundation from which to work in our reflection and study on God's word this morning.

First, the book of Psalms. Psalm is a book of poetry. 150 different poems and songs collected from the Hebrew people from various time periods in Israel's history. Many of them are songs that would have been sung by them. King David wrote almost half of them, 73. The book of Psalms itself is actually broken into five different books. At the beginning of chapter 3, 42, 73, 90, and 107, you see the book title. They each kind of have their own theme. Psalm 119 falls in the fifth book, one where there is an abundance of praise, and specifically for the rescue of God's people, the coming reign of the Lord, and the promised messiah.

So the entirety of Psalm is organized into these different categories. But really, we can't break each psalm down into one of two categories, as psalms of praise, or psalms of lament. Praise is what I mentioned earlier. Lament is the expression of sorrow of the author. Giving over to God the anguish and broken state of the heart and emotions. Thus the Psalms are unique in scripture in how they capture the authentic human experience. The highs and lows of thought life and emotions.

Psalm 119 is unique in the book. It is organized into 22 units each with 8 verses. You'll see a little title at the top, ours this morning is *Teth*. That is a letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Each of these 22 units have a letter assigned to them. And each verse, or line, in the unit begins with that letter. The dominant theme in the whole of Psalm 119 is the Word of God. In fact, of the 176 verses in it, only 5 of them don't explicitly use a word referring to the scriptures. Some scholars actually think four of those 5 implicitly reference scripture, leaving only 1 verse in the whole Psalm that doesn't bring us to the feet of God through his word.

This is a beautiful expression of Godward creativity. Drawing beauty out of language and reflecting it back toward the Creator! Made even more beautiful by the fact that it is words, words meditation on the Words of God! In this Psalm, the author is giving to God in worship, the very thing they are exalting him for: words! How sweet are the Words of the Lord, that I will offer *my* words! Simple and imperfect they may be, yet I will still offer my words to God.

Even before we arrive at our section, we can consider the importance of the words we use. Giving them to the Lord in worship. That is a reason why singing is central to the Christian experience. A surrender of beauty and creativity via our voices, united in offering them to the Lord.

This unit in Psalm 119 is *Teth*, and there is a main idea we are going to explore as we study it. Let's read it all, and see if you can spot it. **Psalm 119:65-72**. The main idea this morning is this, **God's word provides a unique goodness only God's people can taste**. The main idea threaded through this

whole little unit is the goodness of God. What is the 'goodness' of God? When I say that phrase, "the goodness of God," what does that bring to your mind.

Well, what is good? After all, words matter right? Good or goodness is that which is worthy, or that which is worthy of approval. Approval by whom? By God as the final standard, but also worthy of our approval.

So what is the goodness of God? There is who God is, and what God does, **Psalm 119:68**. The poetic expression of worship that we are diving into this morning is primarily concerned with what God does, and what God has done. Not 'goodness' as an attribute of God, but that which God does, his goodness applied.

There is certainly much to say and learn about the attribute of God's goodness, who God is. Even as an attribute of God, it is one of the more complexly wondrous attributes. More than being an attribute of God in and of itself, which it is, it also can be attached to each of God's other attributes. In other words, God's grace is good. God's generosity is good. His judgement is good. His wrath is good. Not a single aspect of who God is, can escape the reality of his goodness. But that's not what our psalm is about! This is a psalm about God's good dealings with his people. Particularly through his words and commandments.

There is a sense that the goodness of what God does is universal. Meaning everyone, Christian and non-Christian will experience and enjoy the goodness of God. The fact that the sun rises every single morning, to melt the frost, to feed the greenery, to warm the earth. That spinning of the earth on it's axis and around the sun to give us day and night, fall and spring, summer and winter. The reality that rain falls to water the earth and our crops. This is all the goodness of God poured out upon humanity. You may say, that's simply creation. Exactly! What did God say when he created everything, "It was good.

Col 1:17. That verse is talking about Jesus. He is actively holding the chaos of this universe together. The first breath we take in the morning is a generous gift of God's goodness. Whether we acknowledge him or not, whether we worship him or not, everyone partakes in the goodness of God.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus says the rain falls on the righteous and the unrighteous, much to the consternation of many of God's people throughout history, including Jeremiah, **Jer. 12:1-2**. Long has there been lament, by Israelite and Christian alike (Psalm 73 a great example), long has there been lament over the prosperity of the wicked. The fact that they get the same rains on their fields and crops and vineyards as everyone else. So there is a aspect of the goodness that God does that is felt by all.

But there is a sweeter and more potent goodness tasted only by God's people. A unique goodness that only those who rest in the goodness of the gospel will taste. This goodness is rich and deep. This goodness transcends circumstances. It reaches beyond time and into eternity. It promises comfort and pleasure this life cannot even glimpse.

This section of Psalm 119 is about the the unique goodness of God that his people can taste, can see, can feel, even in circumstances less than ideal. We will see this theme in four main sections, **1. The**

goodness of God in his faithfulness, 2. The goodness of God in correction, 3. The goodness of God in despair, 4. The great treasure of the goodness of God's Word.

Psalms 119:65-66. That word 'well' is the same word used for good later in the psalm. The psalmist is reflecting on God's good dealings with his people. Good dealings that are 'according to his word'. In other words, according to what he has said and promised. Has God ever lied to his people? Has he ever made a promise and failed to deliver? Has he ever said he will do or accomplish something and failed to do so?

That is the **1. The goodness of God in his faithfulness.** The word for judgement is one of discernment, more literally 'taste'. Not final judgement, punishing the wicked, but the discernment, knowledge. So it is that in God's good judgement, he has determined it good to deal kindly, mercifully, and graciously with his people.

When God led Israel out of Egypt, through the wilderness, toward the promise land, he made a covenant with them through Moses. It was the law at Sinai, they shall observe the law, keep it, teach it to their children, and He will be their God and they will be his people. Uniquely portioned out among mankind to partake in the specific goodness of God. His protection from their enemies, his favor among the nations, through the law atonement for sin, through the law a restraining of evil and sin. Specific and unique goodness, portioned for God's people.

Reading through the OT we see Israel fail, time and time again, to hold up their end of the bargain, to keep the law and the commandments. And yet the Lord never abandons them! He disciplines them. But he never abandons them.

When they were to send out scouts into the promised land, they came back afraid of the nations that were there, refusing to trust the Lord. Their Lord. The good God that brought the plagues upon Egypt, that parted the sea, that fell manna from heaven. So the Lord condemned them to a generation of wandering in the desert as nomads.

As a generation passed away, He brought them once again to the doorstep of the promise land. The Lord utters these words to Joshua **Joshua 1:7, 9.** *"Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success[a] wherever you go...Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."* What follows is several chapters of Israel conquering stronger and mightier nations, taking control of a piece of the lands He had promised to them.

At every point of Israel's breaking the covenant, it would have been perfectly just for the Lord to wash his hands of them. Yet in his discerning judgement, he faithfully chose not to. Even in their rebellion, even in their idolatry, even in their neglect of Him, even in their obstinate betrayal, God's good faithfulness is that he held them still. The clearest pattern of this faithfulness is in the book of Judges, where we witness a cycle of redemption, rededication, and rejection. Over and over and over again. Undoubtedly this reality is in the mind of the psalmist as he acknowledges the goodness of God's faithfulness.

How often do we doubt the good faithfulness of God? How often do we reflect this kind of gratitude toward the Lord for his consistent faithfulness, despite our lack of obedience and holiness? Too often we harbor suspicion and unbelief toward the Lord and his word. We're tempted to think that there is goodness to be found in abandoning the new covenant in Christ, in search of something more satisfying. And why is that? Why do we leave the good promises of the Lord, spurred on by our doubt in his faithful goodness? Why do we, like Israel, do what is right and good in our own eyes, and not what is right and good as given from God?

Because we have neglected his word! Because we do not cherish the scriptures as our psalmist does. Our hearts are betrayed by the contrast they draw with the psalmists words **Psalms 119:66**. "Teach me." What humility! We live life as if we are the ones who determine what is right and good for ourselves. We think so highly of our own needs and desires that we forget we are but image bearers, created to reflect our Creator! And our creator has graciously provided for us all we need to do so...in his word!

If you wrestle with doubt, particularly in the goodness and faithfulness of the Lord, as I often have, humble your heart and ask genuinely from God, "teach me." Teach me your ways. Teach me your truth. Teach me what is good for my soul. Teach me what is good for my family, for my friends, for my community. Acknowledge your ignorance and finite foolishness to think going it alone and figuring it out yourself is what's best. Teach me, O Lord what is good. Teach me discernment and wisdom, good knowledge and truth.

Consider two verses. First, **Hosea 4:6** is one of these condemnations of Israel, as they have once again failed to do what God commanded Joshua, and turned from the scriptures. *"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children."* Consuming the good knowledge of scripture is essential for those that desire closeness with the Lord. It is also essential for living faithfully in a fallen creation as fallen creatures ourselves, we don't accidentally become righteous. **Heb 5:14**, *"But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil."*

If we want to wrestle doubt away from our hearts, we must be immersed in the living waters of the word of God. If we want conviction that God's goodness is indeed good, and his faithfulness is sure, we must bath our hearts in the texts of the OT. Where the deliverance of the Lord is never in doubt. As we take up and read the scriptures, digest the repeated promises of a saviour that will rescue our souls from condemnation. Where we can then rest in the goodness that he indeed delivered us as he said he would. Through the atoning death of Christ Jesus. Through which we have received a new covenant. A 'law of liberty' as James puts it. Bound not by our faithfulness to obedience, but bound by the righteousness of Christ.

And if we want the good discernment of our God -- how now we shall live, as people bought by the blood of Jesus -- we consume the solid food of instruction in the NT. That our powers of discernment might be trained to truly distinguish good from evil. What is pleasing to God and what is not. The greatest enemy of doubt is the word of God. If you want to reflect on the goodness of God's good dealings, and rest in assurance, we must humbly posture ourselves as the psalmist, and seek knowledge from the greatest weapon we have.

Unique to the Christian, is the goodness of God's faithfulness.

2. The goodness of God in correction. This is the first of two sections that specifically reference the afflictions and sufferings of the Christian. **Psalm 119:67-68.** We often pray for deliverance from our suffering. I am chief among those who this would be true of. We find ourselves in a difficult moment, physical illness, relational strife, spiritual darkness, and we long for release from our suffering. And on the other hand, while in moments of prosperity, we rarely acknowledge our need for deliverance. After all, we have what we need.

But it is actually in those times of prosperity, where our need is greatest. For in suffering we see our frailties and failures so much more clearly. When our need for relief from pain and struggle is so great, it isn't a leap to be reminded of our greatest need of relief: sin and death. But when we've grown so fat on the feast of prosperity, we callous our souls to suffering, and even callous our view on the suffering of our savior. Thus, before our affliction, we go astray. We wander from the goodness of the Lord to revel in the temporary promises of the world.

It is then that our feasting on the pleasures of the world lead us not to further prosperity, but to famine. Lead us into affliction. There are two things at work here. First, there are consequences to sin. Second, there is the discipline of the Lord.

Sin separates. It is true of our relationship to God, and our relationship to others. Which is why Jesus boiled the law down to two commands. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind...and love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. Sin separates us from God and from each other. It is often our afflictions are a results of our sin and its consequences. Relational strife, struggling work or school performance, laziness and apathy, lust and temptation, all creating wedges between us and the Lord and between each other.

And yet, what a glorious thing that affliction is! For without it, would we not continue our feasting?! Would we not continue to revel in the temporary and yet ultimately empty promises of sin?! How can the goodness of God be seen in affliction and suffering? Through the discipline of the Lord by the means of sin's consequences. **Hebrews 12:11.** *"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."*

It is this reality that frames the psalmists posture of gratitude for affliction. For it was his affliction that refined his conduct. It was affliction that sharpened his obedience and holiness. And it is in this posture that we see, yet again, humility, **Psalm 119:68.** "Teach me." Yet again, we find the necessity of humility and the word of God. Here, in our own sin, its consequences, and the repentance that follows, humility is central. Without humility, we become like Adam: deceived into a prideful assurance of our own worthiness.

What does humility look like? Confessing sin. Repenting of it. Both with the Lord and with others. That is what the church and discipleship is for. When's the last time you explicitly and openly confessed sin and sought reconciliation and repentance with others in the church? If you can't remember, probably aren't embodying the spirit of humility our Psalmist is. Where then is the instruction on what

repentance looks like for whatever sin we find ourselves confession? Where is the hope? It's in scripture! "Teach me"...what? "your statutes." Your good statutes that flow from your goodness.

Unique to the Christian is the goodness of God in correction.

3. The goodness of God in despair. The psalmists consideration in the previous two verses was the affliction that leads to obedience. The affliction that sharpens. The affliction that leads to greater holiness. The focus here is on the endurance of the Christian, and applying the previously sharpened obedience to the realities of persecution. **Psalm 119:69-71.**

A painful reality for the people of Israel was the opposition they faced amongst the kingdoms of men. They hated the God of Israel. Every time that Israel abandoned their covenants with the Lord, and he gave them over to their enemies, they were subjugated, oppressed and afflicted by the hatred of their enemies. Hatred so deep that it would invent falsehoods to defame God's people, and justify their oppression.

In the early church, the first several centuries, Christians were sporadically persecuted in the Roman empire. One of the ways this persecution was made palatable to the masses, were rumors that would circulate about Christians. These rumors would take an idea native to the Christians, and pervert it to defame and discredit them.

For example, to the Christians, communion was the sacred sacrament of wine and bread, representing the blood and body of Jesus, remembering his substitutionary atoning death. To the Romans, the Christians were cannibals, drinking blood and eating flesh, in some perverse ritualistic practice. To the Christians, the death and resurrection of Jesus is celebrated as sin is atoned for and death is defeated. To the Romans, Christians worshiped and celebrated death like some kind of death cult. The early church so embodied the good conduct of reflecting Christ and keeping his word, that in order to find fault, their opponents needed invented evils and ascribe it to them. In other words, "smear them with lies."

To the world, we today, are needlessly pious. Christians are bigoted and self-righteous. Closed-minded and cold. Un-empathetic and unfeeling. Foolish and ignorant, rejectors of science and reason. Arrogant and self-centered. Hypocritical and inconsistent.

However, unlike the early church, we in the West face little persecution, we endure fewer afflictions, and we don't embody the obedience and holiness of Christ and his word. And, the accusations of the world aren't always contrived inventions, but fair assessments. Few among us can say with the psalmist, we keep his precepts with what, "our whole hearts." We barely know his precepts, how then shall we keep them?! We do not chase holiness and piety with the vigor we ought.

I think, it's fair to say, in a post-Christian West, if we aren't facing some kind of persecution for our faith in Jesus, for our commitment to holiness, or for our evangelistic vigor, then we probably aren't as faithful as we think we are. **John 15:18-20**, *"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. 20 Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.*

If they kept my word, they will also keep yours." Jesus said of his disciples, take up your cross and follow me. He told them they will be hated by the world, even their own families, for the sake of his name.

Now does this mean we seek conflict? Do we become instigators? No, of course not. But holiness and obedience to God and his word should be so stark a contrast with the messy sin of the world, that there cannot help but be an obvious divide between the Christian and not. And evangelizing them, which we are commanded to do, is certainly to draw the ire of those whom the god this world has blinded, who have set themselves against the Lord.

Should we find ourselves faithful to Jesus, and facing persecution because of it, our response should be gratitude. Look what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount? **Matt 5:10-12**, *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

Rejoice and be glad! For that line of separation between the ways of the world and the ways of the Lord are so evident and obvious, that if you face persecution for the sake of Jesus and keeping his word, you can have assurance that you are not on the wide and easy road that leads to destruction and hell, but on the narrow and difficult road that leads to the gates of eternal peace.

Wide is the road that leads to destruction. Filled with those who have indulged on the pleasures of this life, grown calloused and unfeeling toward the things of the Lord. This what Paul speaks about in Romans 1, when he says God has given the unbeliever over their sin. So consumed by their own vices and passions, they have no concept of true delight. Our psalmist says, "their heart is unfeeling like fat, but I delight in your law." We delight in the law of liberty, even as we trod the rocky ground of the narrow way.

Delight carries us into the next verse. **Psalms 119:71**. "It was good, for me, that I was afflicted..." For in our affliction we learn obedience, and are sanctified into the image of Jesus. Charles Spurgeon has a great line here, *"Our worst, is better for us than the sinner's best."* Better is it for us to spend a lifetime as blind beggars, impoverished and broken, fatherless and childless, beaten and broken down, oppressed and rejected, but to have Christ. Than for all the comforts of the world, all the peace of today, all the pleasures of life, and yet to lack eternity. In even your worst moments, you have cause for joy. For you have been bought by the blood of Jesus. Secured in the book of life. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Guaranteed an inheritance beyond the best of this world.

Unique to the Christian, is the goodness of God in despair, in suffering, and in persecution.

4. The great treasure of the goodness of God in his word. We have none of this without the revelation of God to mankind. We know none this without the scriptures, in which the Lord has invested his power, and preserved truth. **Psalms 119:72**. The unique goodness of the Lord, that he has reserved for his people, is found in his word.

For what is anything we've discussed today with the assurance that it is all true?! Without the authority of scripture, our hopes in this life are but vague speculations. Vague speculations built on the shaky sands of finite intellect and fallen virtues.

Such is the weight of value we have in the scriptures. More precious are they than any treasure we might build for ourselves. By them we can know God. By them we can partake in the unique goodness of the Lord. Through them we can rejoice in suffering, and not become complacent in our prosperity.

In closing, I want to tell an origin story. One of Augustine of Hippo, or St. Augustine. He is known for such works and *Confessions*, and *The City of God*. He is one of the most influential and important figures in the history of the Church. Before he was the famous pastor, theologian and apologist, he was a professor of rhetoric. Struggling to fight his flesh and sin. Particularly his proclivity for lust and sexual sin, thievery and greed, and lies and falsehoods.

One day, sitting under a fig tree in Milan, the famous professor lamented his struggles, crying out to the Lord for release from his bondage to sin and suffering. On the winds of providence, floated to his listening ears, from the mouth of a child playing somewhere he couldn't see, the phrase floated, "Take up and read, take up and read, take up and read." So he opened the scriptures, and landed on the book of Romans, Paul's distinct call to holiness in chapter 13. Speaking directly to the flesh that now enslaved him. And thus began the religious life of Augustine of Hippo.

Unique to the Christian, is the great treasure of the goodness of God in his word. So take up and read. In poverty and in plenty take up and read. In persecution and in peace, take up and read. In every moment, take up and read. Meditate on scripture. Memorize scripture. Immerse yourself in the living waters of the word of God.