

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 21, 2019**

WHEN LIFE IS UNFAIR

Lamentations 3:19-26

We had a “roaring” good time at our **ROAR!** VBS this past week. Julie Cloutier and her team did a magnificent job of leading the children from our church and community in a safari-themed experience that included dinner each night for the children and their families, fun activities (many of which involved water!), crafts, music, and Bible lessons to teach the children that though life is sometimes wild and unpredictable, God is always good. No matter what.

Each evening there was a Bible lesson based on a different theme.

- The theme the first evening (Monday) was: *When life is unfair, God is good.*
- The second evening (Tuesday): *When life is scary, God is good.*
- The third evening (Wednesday): *When life changes, God is good.*
- The fourth evening (Thursday): *When life is sad, God is good.*
- The fifth evening (Friday): *When life is good, God is good.*

All of these things are true – and not just for kids. They are biblical truths for all of life, no matter your age.

Life *is* sometimes unfair. Bad things do happen to good people. Sometimes bad people do bad things and get away with it. Sometimes people cheat and get away with it. Sometimes people who do evil get ahead in this world, while people who do what is right suffer for it. When any of these things happens to you or to someone you know and love or to anyone, God is still good.

When you are falsely accused of something or punished for something you didn't do, it doesn't feel good. It *isn't* good. But sometimes it happens. When it does, it doesn't change the truth about God. God is still good. There is never a time when God is not good.

When life is hard, when your job is hard, when school is hard, when your marriage is hard, when parenting is hard, when getting along with your parents or your brothers or sisters is hard, when someone lets you down, God is still good. As our children learned, from Nahum 1:7:

The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble.
He cares for those who trust in Him.

When life is scary – and face it, this world can be a scary place – God is still good. David, in the Old Testament, knew what it was like to be afraid. His life was frequently in danger. But he knew what to do with his fear. In Psalm 56 he said to the Lord:

When I am afraid, I will trust in You.
 In God, whose word I praise,
 in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
 What can mortal man do to me?
 (Psalm 56:3-4)

The truth is that evil, wicked people can do a lot of evil, wicked, frightful things to us. Nevertheless, amid all the dangers, toils, and snares of this life, David knew that God is still God, that God is good, and that God is trustworthy. As a result, he could say in Psalm 27:

The LORD is my light and my salvation;
 whom shall I fear?
 The LORD is the stronghold of my life;
 of whom shall I be afraid?
 (Psalm 27:1)

I remember Steve Brown telling about a woman who would say: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? *No one here.*”

It doesn't matter how young or old you are: Life is sometimes scary. But God is still good. And He wants us to replace our fear of this or that – of the future, of the unknown, of illness or suffering or some other calamity beyond our control – with faith in Him. Because He is God. And He is good. And He is trustworthy.

Our VBS children also learned that when life changes, God is good. Change is one of the constants in life. The weather changes. Seasons change. People change (for better or for worse). Your health changes. Circumstances change. Technology changes. The economy changes. Political winds change. Jobs change. Families move. Sometimes change is good. But not always. And even if it's good, change can be hard, because we get used to the way things are. So change itself can be scary. But when life changes, even when it is uncomfortable, God is still good. And God never changes. Jesus, as it says in Hebrews 13:8, is “the same, yesterday, today, and forever.”

As Psalm 106:1 urges us, we can
 Give thanks to the LORD, for He is good;
 His faithful love endures forever.

In other words, God's love for us does not change, because God Himself does not change.

Paul says it this way in 2 Timothy 2:13:

If we are faithless,
 He (God) will remain faithful,
 for He cannot disown Himself.

No matter what happens to you or to someone you love, no matter what tragedies or catastrophes take place in the world, God does not and will not change. When life changes, God is still good. Always.

It is also true, our children learned, that when life is sad, God is good. The ultimate occasion of sadness and grief took place when Jesus was condemned to die and was crucified on a Roman cross for your sins and mine. Nothing in the history of the world has ever compared to the injustice that occurred on the cross, where the sinless Son of God willingly sacrificed His life for a world full of undeserving sinners.

In the death of Jesus for us, we see the ultimate expression of the goodness of God. The cross shows that God understands the sadness and grief and pain we sometimes feel, because of the sadness and grief and loss He experienced in the death of His Son. God understands your grief. God understands your hurt. God understands the pain you feel in your heart. David bears witness in Psalm 34:18 that “the LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” Elsewhere (1 Peter 5:7) the Bible urges us to cast all our cares on Him, because He cares for us. He cares for *you*. Right where you are. In the midst of whatever you are going through. You can cast your cares on Him without fear of rejection, because He cares for you.

When life is sad, God is good.
 When life is hard, God is good.
 When life changes, God is good.
 When life is scary, God is good.
 When life is unfair, God is good.
 When bad things happen, God is good.
 When people let you down, God is good.
 When you receive bad news, God is good.
 When you feel like your heart is breaking, God is good.
 In all these things, God is good.

And, when life is good, God is good. When you feel like life couldn't get any better than this, God is good. When you're basking in the warmth and gentle breeze of God's blessings, God is good. In those times – and always – as Nehemiah said to the people who were helping to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem: “Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” (Nehemiah 4:14). Remember the Lord, and never stop giving Him thanks and praise.

Life can be pretty wild. Some of you know that better than others. It can be like white-water rafting. I've only done it a couple times, but that's enough for me. No matter how wild life gets, though, never forget that God is still good.

We may ask: What does it mean to say that “God is good”? First of all, to say that God is good means that He is morally perfect. He is the standard of moral perfection. Morally speaking, God has no flaws. No pimples. No blemishes. No stains on His record. No demerits. He is perfectly righteous in His character and conduct. Perfectly just. Perfectly holy. Perfectly good. He does nothing wrong. He *cannot* do anything wrong. Not

everything that happens is good. Not everything that happens is pleasing to God. He has given us freedom to make choices, and the human race has used this freedom to rebel against God and to go our own way. But flawed as we are, there is no flaw in God. He is intrinsically good. Always. And in all ways.

But it is not enough simply to acknowledge that God is morally good. There is more to it. God's goodness is seen in every attribute of His character. Think of God's proclamation to Moses of His name and character on Mount Sinai in Exodus 34. He said: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin Yet He does not leave the guilty unpunished" (Exodus 34:6-7).

J. I. Packer points out in his classic *Knowing God* that "God's truthfulness and trustworthiness, His unailing justice and wisdom, His tenderness, forbearance, and entire adequacy to all who penitently seek His help, His noble kindness in offering (us) the exalted destiny of fellowship with Him in holiness and love – these things together make up God's goodness, in the overall sense of the sum total of all His revealed excellences" (Packer, *Knowing God*, 146).

Packer goes on to say that the quality of generosity, which he defines as a disposition to give to others in a way that has no mercenary motive (in other words, He is not nice to us in order to get something from us) and is not limited by what the recipients deserve, is the focal point of God's moral perfection (Packer, 146) – which is another way of speaking of God's grace that comes free of charge to people like us who don't deserve it and never will.

When we say that God is good, it is not a simplistic, childlike slogan to make us feel better when life is unfair, when bad things happen, when we're afraid, when life changes, when we get bad news, or when we're sad. It is not just a pious mantra to repeat to ourselves or to others who need to be cheered up. It is more than that.

It is a reminder of who God is in the midst of all our circumstances and experiences in life. It is a reminder of God's intrinsic goodness. It is a reminder that there is no defect or flaw in either God's character or conduct. It is also a reminder that God is perfectly wise. It is a reminder that God's purposes for us and for this world are good. It is a reminder that God's ways are always good, even if they are mysterious to us. Even if we cannot see or understand what God is up to, or why He allows what He allows – especially when life seems unfair and evil seems to prevail – we affirm by faith that God's ways are always good. It is a reminder that God's plans for His people are good and that He is constantly at work for good in the lives of those who love Him and have been called according to His redeeming purpose (Romans 8:28).

All of this said, it is not always easy to see that God is good. If Andrew Brunson went through a period of doubting God's goodness when he was in prison in Turkey, who among us could blame him? Praise God that by the grace of God he came through it – not only through a time of doubt and spiritual depression, but through his imprisonment as well.

Jerry Sittser, the author of *A Grace Disguised* and its sequel *A Grace Revealed*, lost his wife, two of his four children, and his mother when their family van was hit head-on by a drunk driver. Talk about life being unfair! Talk about life being sad! Talk about a horrible grief and loss! God *is* good. But sometimes it is almost impossible for us to see how He can be good, especially when evil or tragedy or injustice hits us head-on at full speed.

Then there is Jeremiah the prophet. Jeremiah was known as “the weeping prophet” because the stubborn sinfulness of the people of Jerusalem and Judah broke his heart and often brought him to tears. As a prophet, Jeremiah had an unenviable task. His mission was to be God’s messenger to a people who would not listen to him. He carried out his mission faithfully for 40 years. If they had done polls back then, his approval rating would have been in the single digits, if that high. For speaking God’s word, he was thrown into prison and into a cistern (which served as a prison in his case). He was rejected by his family, friends, and neighbors. He was opposed by false priests and prophets, and by the kings of Judah who didn’t like his message from God. Jeremiah was obedient and faithful to God ... and it cost him big time.

We see the heart of Jeremiah in Lamentations 3. The Book of Lamentations is a series of funeral songs lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem and conquest of the nation of Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BC, and the subsequent exile in Babylon of many of the citizens of Jerusalem and Judah. These laments express deep sorrow over what has happened to God’s people because of their stubborn refusal to turn away from their sin and turn back to God.

In chapter 3, Jeremiah gets personal. Intensely personal. Listen as he describes the depths of his own pain and suffering, beginning in verse 1:

- ¹ I am the man who has seen affliction
by the rod of His (God’s) wrath.
- ² He has driven me away and made me walk
in darkness rather than light;
- ³ indeed, He has turned His hand against me
again and again, all day long.
- ⁴ He has made my skin and my flesh grow old
and has broken my bones.
- ⁵ He has besieged me and surrounded me
with bitterness and hardship.
- ⁶ He has made me dwell in darkness
like those long dead.
- ⁷ He has walled me in so I cannot escape;
He has weighed me down with chains.
- ⁸ Even when I call out or cry for help,
He shuts out my prayer.
- ⁹ He has barred my way with blocks of stone;
He has made my paths crooked.

¹⁰ Like a bear lying in wait,
 like a lion in hiding,
¹¹ He dragged me from the path and mangled me
 and left me without help.
¹² He drew His bow and made me
 the target for His arrows.
¹³ He pierced my heart
 with arrows from His quiver.
¹⁴ I became the laughingstock of all my people;
 they mock me in song all day long.
¹⁵ He has filled me with bitter herbs
 and sated me with gall.

¹⁶ He has broken my teeth with gravel;
 He has trampled me in the dust.
¹⁷ I have been deprived of peace;
 I have forgotten what prosperity is.
¹⁸ So I say, "My splendor is gone
 and all that I had hoped from the LORD."
 (Lamentations 3:1-18)

Jeremiah had served God faithfully. For decades. He had obeyed God. At great personal cost, he had consistently spoken God's word to a hardhearted and sinful nation. And this is what he had gotten in return. If anyone could say life is unfair, it was Jeremiah.

But this is not the end of Jeremiah's testimony. He does not deny how he feels. He does not delete it from his Twitter account, but he does proceed to put it into perspective by what he says next:

¹⁹ [Yes] I remember my affliction and my wandering,
 the bitterness and the gall.
²⁰ I well remember them, - [who could forget?] –
 and my soul is downcast within me.
²¹ *Yet this I call to mind
 and therefore I have hope:*
²² *Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
 for His compassions never fail.*
²³ *They are new every morning;
 great is your faithfulness.*
²⁴ *I say to myself, "The LORD is my portion;
 therefore I will wait for Him."*
²⁵ *The LORD is good to*
²⁶ *it is good to wait quietly
 for the salvation of the LORD.*
 (3:19-26, *emphasis added*)

Jeremiah found his hope not in the politics of his day, not in the comforts of this life, nor in the popularity of his message (which was basically non-existent). He found his hope, instead, in the goodness of God. By God's grace, Jeremiah was able to trace the goodness of God in the threads of God's unchanging love, compassion, and faithfulness woven through his life.

When life is unfair or just plain hard, God is *good*. God is *loving* – and it is because of His great love for us, undeserving sinners that we are, that we are not consumed by His righteous anger. God is *merciful* and *compassionate*. “He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10). God is *faithful*. “His faithfulness continues through all generations” (Psalm 100:5b).

When life is scary or people let you down, God is *trustworthy*. He keeps His promises. His character does not change. He will not let go of you. His grace is and will be sufficient for you.

When life changes or threatens to overwhelm you, *God. Is. Good. And God. Is. Sovereign.* He is still on the throne of the universe. Nothing can ever happen to you that is outside of His sovereign rule. Which means that nothing can ever happen that God does not have the power to redeem. And nothing can ever separate you from His love.

Our VBS children learned this week that when life is unfair or scary or unpredictable or sad or anything else, God is good. No matter what. May we all learn the same. Trust and rest in the goodness of God, knowing that He is able – more than able – to do much more than we could ever ask or think or hope or dream or imagine, because of His power at work in us (Ephesians 3:20).

Do not ever believe that God is not good. Even in the darkest hour of your life. Do not ever believe that He is not sovereign. Or that He is not faithful. Or that He is not able to accomplish what concerns you today or to handle anything that comes your way, for now or eternity.

He *is* able. He *is* faithful. He *is* sovereign. He *is* good. Believe. Hold onto it. And live it.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.